



## INTRODUCTION TO LEONHARD LAPIN'S "OBJECTIVE ART"

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Leonhard Lapin's "Objective Art" was written for Event Harku '75: Objects, Concepts—an exhibition and an accompanying symposium on the premises of the Institute of Experimental Biology in Harku, near Tallinn, Estonia, in December 1975. Organized by Lapin together with artists Sirje Runge (his wife at the time) and Raul Meel and physicist Tõnu Karu, the symposium was officially billed as a meeting between young artists and scientists, and the exhibition was opened a week ahead of the event. Lapin's speech at the symposium, of which a translation follows, not only served as an introduction to the works and exhibited artists, but also acted as a manifesto for a tendency in Estonian art of the 1970s that Lapin termed "objective" and that he saw as having a growing significance in the future. Objective art, in the artist's mind, answered to the industrialization and urbanization of the late 20th century, to the growing significance of not only mechanical but also electronic machines in everyday life, and to the emergence of the so-called artificial environment. Rather than representing this environment, new art had to intervene in it or even produce it. Lapin's call was quite different from other reactions to the changing postindustrial environment in the mid-1970s in the Soviet Union, in that instead of active intervention, many of them proposed withdrawal as the most appropriate tactic to resist the grim surrounding reality.

Lapin, born in 1947, was throughout the 1970s a central figure in

a circle of architects and artists in Tallinn who had studied in the Estonian State Art Institute during the first half of the decade. In their artistic work, the members of this circle sought various ways to comment on the changing everyday life and the modern urban environment. In this they employed means and methods drawn from pop art, abstract art, and conceptual practices, but also, as Lapin's text makes clear, from the historical avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s. This approach contrasted with the previous generation of artists of the Thaw and post-Thaw periods in the 1960s who had emphasized in their work notions of artistic autonomy and aesthetic value and who saw art as an apolitical, self-contained object. In his speech Lapin terms this latter approach "lyrical-romantic art," art that offers solely sensuous pleasure, relying on traditional means of representation and on a play with forms and colors that contradicts the needs of the contemporary environment. If lyrical-romantic art depends on an artist's personal handwriting and is thus "subjective," the new art that participates in the construction of a new kind of environment needs to be "objective," free from emotions and with a universal aspiration.



A happening at the former airfield in Lasnamäe, Tallinn, 1974. From left: Jaan Ollik, Avo-Himm Looveer, Leonhard Lapin, Tiit Kaljundi, Kristin-Mari Looveer, Jüri Okas, Liivi Künnapu, Vilen Künnapu, Sirje Runge. Photograph by Jüri Okas.

The interest of Lapin and his colleagues in the transformation of urban reality derived also from their diverse backgrounds: Lapin had graduated in 1971 from the architecture department and Runge studied industrial design until 1975, while several other participants in the Harku exhibition also came from architecture or design backgrounds. At the same time, throughout their studies they actively collaborated with other art fields, took part in exhibitions and events, organized happenings and theater performances, and interacted with writers and musicians. Lapin frequently contributed to the cultural media on topics ranging from contemporary architecture and the preservation of the 20th-century heritage (from 1971 to 1974 he worked at the State Directorate for Restoration) to the use of audiovisual technology in contemporary theater performances. The idea of art as engaging with the (postindustrial) environment emerged in several texts from these years. In 1971, in a speech titled “Art Designs the Environment” and delivered at the Exhibition of Independent Student Works at the State Art Institute, he stated that “the human living environment has become the central concern for contemporary culture . . . all spatial artworks serve this aim.”<sup>1</sup> He further distinguished between “beautiful art” as a commodity intended to function as a home decoration and art that represented an “architectural sensibility” and was intended to contribute to the production of a new environment. The same Exhibition of Independent Student Works is mentioned later in Lapin’s “Objective Art,” together with a happening titled “Coloring the Elephant” that followed its opening. During this happening a large group of art and architecture students repainted a dilapidated playground in a turn-of-the-century suburb of Tallinn in bright yellow, red, and green. From today’s viewpoint the circumstances of the happening are telling: the whole undertaking was supported by the local municipal housing committee, which also provided the paint, giving the students recognition. More importantly, the artists’ choice of the site demonstrated their interest in strange, abandoned, and “uncanny” urban spaces that contrasted with the rationalized new towns. This interest in art descending to the streets or foraying into abandoned industrial quarters continued during the second half of the 1970s. In a speech given in 1976 at a meeting of young artists and actors, Lapin proposed erasing the borders

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1 Leonhard Lapin, “Taie kujundamas keskkonda” (1971), in Leonhard Lapin, *Kaks kunsti. Valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist 1971–1995* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1997), 16.

between everyday life and theater by calling for the replacement of historical theater buildings with “theater-factories, theater-combines, theater-systems.”<sup>2</sup> If the style of Lapin’s speech was occasionally hyperbolic, it should not be seen as a mere parody, for several of his ideas were consistent with his artistic interests at the time. In the same year Lapin organized a major overview of Estonian monumental art that included a section on experimental architectural and art proposals. In 1978 he was one of the leading forces behind the architecture exhibition that aimed to criticize the dominant architecture establishment in Estonia through conceptual projects.<sup>3</sup>

It is Lapin’s interest in the rediscovery of the evolving postindustrial territories of the city, together with an aesthetic derived from industrialization and machine logic, that provides the context for “Objective Art.” Lapin describes the process of “objectification” as resulting from 20th-century industrialization and mechanization and as a conscious acknowledgment that humanity depends on machines and on what Lapin calls the *artificial environment*. The term *artificial environment* is related to the expansion of the postindustrial environment, including immaterial networks as well as the recognition of marginal territories in the urban economy.

If an interest in the growing urban culture and its relationship to contemporary art was commonplace in the early 20th century, it reemerged in the postwar Soviet Union during the 1960s when a new wave of industrialization initiated heated discussions about the character of art and its role in society. Collaborations between artists and scientists similar to the Harku event were widespread and officially endorsed throughout the 1960s. Moreover, early in the decade groups such as Prometei in Kazan and Dvizhenie in Moscow actively investigated ways to redefine art in the face of new technologies and media. Yet by the mid-1970s most of these initiatives had either dissolved or seamlessly merged with the mainstream media. According to common belief, the 1970s were a reaction to the optimistic 1960s, when widespread hopes for a techno-utopia and a reformed socialist society were crushed (the so-called Prague Spring) and followed by Brezhnev-era

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- 2 Leonhard Lapin, “Ettepanek Tallinna teatrielu muutmiseks Tallinna eluteatriks,” in *Ettekanne 28. 03 1976, seoses teatrikuuga toimunud loomingulise noorsoo kohtumisel* (manuscript in Leonhard Lapin’s personal archive).
  - 3 On both exhibitions, see Mari Laanemets, “Flight into Tomorrow: Rethinking Artistic Practice in Estonia during the 1970s (Leonhard Lapin)” (this issue).

political and economic regression. The 1970s were marked by a growing dissident movement that withdrew to private spaces, seeking shelter in irony and individualism or in happenings and actions that consciously retreated from the urban environment. In this context, what made Lapin's call different from being solely a belated engagement with technology and art? Industrialization and mechanization had been the Soviet Union's official utopia, promising better living standards and equal welfare for all. However, this was only partially achieved, and by the 1970s several phenomena that had previously been hailed as progressive—such as mass housing—had become subject to extensive critique. Belonging to the generation that was critical of the socialist-modernist bureaucratic society, Lapin and his colleagues were fully aware of this. And yet, instead of turning his back on modernization, Lapin, on the contrary, proposed that industrialization had not been extensive enough. Writing in 1973 about the all-encompassing machine age, he argued that it was most clearly and most radically represented by industrially produced architecture. Moreover, according to Lapin, “[s]tructures with exceptionally complex functionality (like factories), could be considered machines rather than architecture.”<sup>4</sup> From an architecture that was produced by a machine he looked forward to an architecture that would itself be like a machine and serve its user. Lapin's thinking was very likely inspired by groups such as Archigram, Coop Himmelblau, and others.

In the art context, Lapin saw machines and machine environments as opening up endless playful potential. In a print series from the mid-1970s—*Machines*, *Man-Machine*, and *Woman-Machine* (exhibited also in Harku)—Lapin demonstrated an almost Marcusean position toward technology, criticizing the narrow association of machines only with production and putting them at the service of pleasure and freedom of choice.

The second feature that separated artists in Tallinn during the 1970s from the experiments of the 1960s was their emphasis on a different kind of viewer. This resulted from the growing influence of (Western) mass culture in society, from the spread of rock music, from popular TV culture, and from the increasing spread of consumer items. More importantly, a change in the structure of the viewer's relationship

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4 Leonhard Lapin, “Masinaajastu ja kunst,” *Kultuur ja Elu* 9 (1973): 56.

to media of mass communication occurred at this time. Technology was now considered to be more central to everyday life, and for this reason these new means of communication were believed to stand in a much more personal or direct relationship to their users. More than once during the 1970s Lapin and his colleagues argued that TV and radio rendered all previous artistic approaches futile, demanding a heightened attention to the medium: “a child who is born in the 1970s grows up inside a speeding car and on the background of pulsating television screens.”<sup>5</sup> It would have been unlikely for such an audience to have the same interest in traditional art genres. In a text written together with Runge, Lapin urged the investigation of the synaesthetic potential embedded in new technologies: “The new era employs sensorial, motoric, kinetic, sonic, and verbal means as information in order to embrace all human senses and the central nervous system.”<sup>6</sup> If the new means of information were on an everyday level represented by TV and radio, then its equivalent in art had to be kinetic art and happenings rather than traditional representational art objects.

Two important sources for Lapin’s text may help shed additional light on the background ideas that were important for him at the time. The first is Malevich’s 1927 treatise *The Non-objective World* (translated by Lapin, literally, as “The Objectless World” so that the title may correspond with his use of the word *objective*). Lapin was first introduced to Malevich in 1968 through a Polish translation of *Non-objective World* that was available in local bookshops. In 1975 he came into contact with Pavel Kondratiev, a student of Malevich’s and Pavel Filonov’s who gave him access to the Russian translation. That same year while they were visiting the International Council of the Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) congress in Moscow, Lapin and Runge visited George Costakis’s collection of Russian avant-garde art.

Lapin’s concept of objective art is indebted to Malevich’s text in more ways than one: from his emphasis on the new art being born out of urban culture (for Malevich, futurism and cubism represented “the art of the industrial, taut environment”)<sup>7</sup> to the priority he gives to artistic production over representation (“an artist who creates rather

5 Ibid., 56.

6 Sirje Lapin (Runge) and Leonhard Lapin, “On sügis, lehed langevad,” in *Thespis. Meie teatri-uendused 1972/73*, ed. V. Vahing (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 1997), 289.

7 Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-objective World* (Chicago: Theobald, 1959), 61.

than imitates expresses himself; his works are not reflections of nature but, instead, new realities, which are no less significant than the realities of nature itself”).<sup>8</sup> Beyond that, Lapin, like Malevich, emphasizes the role of intellectuals in providing inspiration for the creation of art (“creative workers are thus always a step ahead of the general public—they show it the road of progress”).<sup>9</sup>

What also becomes explicit in the English translation of Lapin’s speech is his paradoxical use of the term *objective* in relation to Malevich’s *nonobjectivity* (Russian *bezpredmetnost’*). Lapin’s understanding of objective art brings together several separate traditions: “objective” art for him is a way of giving up actual objects and proceeding toward nonobjectivity; at the same time, Lapin derives his examples from various reappropriations of objecthood in the postwar period: the use of iconic images in paintings by Estonian artists such as Malle Leis, or the found objects in works by Kaljo Põllu. Lapin’s relationship to nonobjectivity was somewhat clarified in a later text on Malevich where Lapin proposed that while he gave up objectivity with his creation of the Black Square, Malevich nevertheless created a new type of objectivity, “a reality of concretized feelings.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, according to Lapin, Malevich’s architectural models (*architektons*) should be seen as a radical return to the objective world, “although this world is imbued with the spiritual.”<sup>11</sup>

The second source for “Objective Art”—a more implicit one—is Pierre Restany’s *White Book*, published in Milan in 1969 as *Livre Blanc–Objet Blanc* and available to Lapin through its Finnish translation in 1970, when it was distributed as a supplement to the art year-

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8 Ibid., 30.

9 Ibid., 34.

10 Leonhard Lapin, “Musta ruudu maagia,” in *Kaks kunsti. Valimik ettekandeid ja artikleid kunstist ning ehituskunstist 1971–1995* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1997), 90.

11 Ibid., 90. The revival of the historical avant-gardes in the Soviet Union during the 1970s has been sometimes seen as a kind of mimicry or a tactic that was in fact widespread at the time: in order to legitimize contemporary art practices, one needed to find precedents for it in the past, and the Soviet Union’s own avant-garde heritage was most suitable for this. Sirje Helme, “In the Beginning There Was No Word,” in Lapin, *Kaks kunsti*, 194. Yet this interpretation reduces the theories of Malevich and others solely to an opportunistic mask without any real relevance for Lapin’s work. However, in fact, Lapin’s avant-garde rhetoric pointed to the utopian meaning hidden inside the abstract aesthetic of modernism, while at the same time it sustained the official course of industrialization and mechanization. This rhetoric gave agency in modeling the new society to the artist/architect, who now, being in control of various streams of information, was responsible not only for issues of form and typology, but also for the meaning of the architectural environment.

book *Taide*.<sup>12</sup> The manifesto-like *White Book*, written after the events of May 1968 in Paris, was intended to provide guidance for artists to overcome the separation between traditional art forms and embrace new technology in the name of the art of the future (“total art” and “art for all”). Significantly for the Soviet context, Restany linked the revolts of 1968 to those in Prague on account of the fact that in both cases the protestors belonged to the same generation. Other points in Restany’s book that reverberated with Lapin’s concerns include the fact that Restany viewed science and technology and their collaboration as fundamental for the redefinition of the art of the future. This, he argued, would help overcome the differences between various fields of art (“painters and sculptors, urbanists and architects, composers and choreographers, designers and aestheticians, film-makers and poets”).<sup>13</sup> Lapin quotes Restany directly at the end of his “Objective Art,” where he copies the concluding paragraph of Restany’s *White Book*, concerning art descending to the streets and museums becoming centers of production. Lapin writes,

If we reject the enormous opportunity that is within our reach today, and if we predict that excessive mechanization will lead to the destruction of the culture we want to achieve, we will empty out the freedom of action, creation, thought, and seeing; and in doing so we will negate the human being.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that where for Restany the emphasis was on defending art’s synthesis with technology as a tool for collective liberation, in the Soviet Estonian context the emphasis shifted to the “negation of the human being” through censorship and the restriction of free speech. This inspired the artist Raul Meel to call his *samizdat* collection of texts from the Harku ’75 symposium *To Allow for the Human Being*.

For several Western critics, Restany’s statements in *Livre Blanc–Objet Blanc* hinted at the complicity of neo-avant-garde art with the

12 Pierre Restany, *Valkoinen kirja* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1970). The original wish of the author and publisher was to disseminate the book, which in the French edition had only a white cover without any text on it, by word of mouth and not through official sources of distribution. See Romy Golan, *Point de chute: Restany à Domus–Le Demi-Siècle de Pierre Restany*, ed. Richard Leeman (Paris: INHA 2009), 408–9.

13 Pierre Restany, *Valkoinen kirja*, 33.

14 Leonhard Lapin, “Objective Art” (this issue), from Leonhard Lapin, “Objektiivne kunst,” in *Valimik artikleid ja ettekandeid kunstist 1967–1977* (Tallinn, 1977), 63.



market and its dominant institutions.<sup>15</sup> Restany's uncritical celebration of technology has been seen as connoting the acceptance of postwar spectacular capitalist society with its emergent mechanisms of control.<sup>16</sup> If this critique cannot be directly transposed to Soviet Estonia in the 1970s, it does point to the possible dangers implicit in Lapin's position. Lapin in his speech demands more support for objective art from "public organizations and state institutions" because otherwise "the quality of this [objective] art will not be improved even in ten years' time." However, it is hard to imagine how, if Lapin's demand were fulfilled, objective art could have avoided becoming entangled with the dominant power structures and prevented from turning into a form of propaganda. It is similarly hard to imagine how the artist-intellectual for whom Lapin claims agency in his speech could have maintained her independence in these circumstances. At the time when Lapin was making his proposal for objective art, artists and architects were actively rediscovering urban wastelands and their "otherness" as their playgrounds, using kinetic objects as stage decorations for rock concerts, and initiating discussions in the media on the role and possible uses of the industrial heritage. It might then be argued that, contrary to Lapin's own assumption, objective art maintained its utopian status as an alternative and answer to the status quo precisely to the extent that the official power structures did not adequately identify or address the emergence of a new viewer subjectivity and the appearance of a new postindustrial environment.

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- 15 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), 139. (He is referring to Restany's article "Le Livre blanc de l'art total, pour une esthetique prospective," *Domus* 262 [1968].)
- 16 Benjamin Buchloh, "Plenty or Nothing: From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*," in *Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France 1958–1998* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998).

## OBJECTIVE ART

LEONHARD LAPIN

The current exhibition is held under the star of objective art.<sup>1</sup> It brings together artists who in their work do not express their subjective world outlook, who do not indulge in forms inspired by actuality; rather, they have moved toward a higher level of general ideas, objective structures, or materials. An objective work of art is not an imitation of reality but part of reality, or reality itself. An objective artist does not express, he constructs; his creative process is not so much emotional and spontaneous as it is intellectual.

The most extreme and most modern form of today's objective art is Conceptualism, which is concerned with the representation of the facts of reality itself. To the art that imitates or interprets reality, the Conceptualists have counterposed the art of ideas, set free from materiality, the art of pure concepts, which in itself is a fact of reality.

Impressionism in painting and Art Nouveau in all aspects of art and design, which triumphed in the last quarter of the 19th century, derived their inspiration from nature, and were thus the last art movements that represented forms that had surrounded the human being up to that point. Advances in science and technology, which have contributed to increased productivity as well as the growth of cities, have allowed us to create—next to the natural landscape—an artificial

1 All underlined words and passages are by Lapin and can be found in the original text.

environment that has now become home to the majority of inhabitants in civilized countries.

Paul Cézanne who, in his Post-Impressionist painting, strove for the geometrical reduction of natural forms to three basic shapes—the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder—can be considered one of the first objective artists. His was an attempt to model an artificial environment within the framework of living nature. In 1906, the Cubists revolutionized our concept of space, bringing different views of objects simultaneously onto the picture plane, representing reality in a fragmented way and in its simple geometric shapes.

Basic geometric forms that are actually used in architecture, the urban environment, and industrial culture have introduced into painting the technological world and an objective reality that is independent of the human being.

Cubism also incorporated collage—materials without specifically painterly qualities—as a typographic element, and as a product of mass communication.

One of the first committed proponents of objective art is, in my opinion, Kazimir Malevich, the father of Russian Suprematism, who in 1913 rejected a subjective approach to pictorial representation and the play with the attributes of reality; instead, he created a new artistic reality cleansed of all that is traditional—“a black square against a white background.” It was a courageous act—to abandon all the canons of old and modern art, to remove everything beautiful, to make actuality disappear, and create a new reality as a “zero form,” establishing a whole new art system on it.

Here it would be useful to recall some of Malevich’s thoughts from “The Objectless World”:<sup>2</sup>

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2 The following translation has been altered here to fit Lapin’s use of the notions of “objective” and “objectivity.” Lapin used a Russian version of Malevich’s book, *Mir kak bespredmetnost’* [The world as nonobjectivity], translating the Russian term *predmet* (object) into Estonian as *ese* (thing, item, object). The 1959 English translation of the same quote in *The Non-objective World* reads, “When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, ‘Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert. . . . Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!’ . . . But a blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the ‘desert,’ where nothing is real except feeling . . . and so feeling became the substance of my life. This was no ‘empty square’ which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non-objectivity.” Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-objective World* (Chicago: Theobald, 1959), 68–74.

*When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of actual objects, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, "Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert. . . . Before us is nothing but a black square on a white background!" . . .*

*But a blissful sense of being liberated from things drew me forth into the "desert," where nothing is real except feeling . . . and so feeling became the substance of my life. This was no "empty square" which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of thinglessness. . . . The general public is still convinced today that art is bound to perish if it gives up the imitation of "dearly-loved reality" and so it observes with dismay how the black square of pure feeling—abstraction—makes more and more headway.<sup>3</sup>*

The form of representation that Malevich created gave birth to magnificent Russian Suprematism and Constructivism, and their ideas are alive to this day. Art movements developing an objective visual language also took shape in Germany, as embodied by the Bauhaus; in Holland—De Stijl; in France—L'Esprit Nouveau; and elsewhere. Objective visual language dominated architecture and design in the whole world during the interwar period, enabling the combination of new ways of production with aesthetics. Architecture and industrial design, which grew out of this objectivity, predominate in the art of building and applied art of today.

The Futurists, who in 1909 published their first manifesto in Italy, can also be mentioned as one of the founders of objectivity. They were the first modern art group that consciously rejected the cultural tradition of the past and sought to make art that would correspond to the new industrial civilization. The Futurists were the first to view the machine as the symbol of a new beauty, underlining two attributes of the machine as the principal elements of the new art culture—speed and power. It would perhaps be useful to point out some ideas from the "Manifesto of Futurist Architecture," written by the Futurist architect Antonio Sant' Elia in 1914:

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3 The last sentence was modified by Lapin. The original English text reads, ". . . and so it observes with dismay how the hated element of pure feeling—abstraction—makes more and more headway." Malevich, *The Non-objective World*, 74.

*We must build the Futurist city, related to the changing aims of the era and the appearance of machines, like an immense and tumultuous structure, active, mobile, and everywhere dynamic, and the Futurist house like a gigantic machine.*

*. . . [A]rchitecture must be understood as the conditions, made with great freedom and boldness, to harmonize man and his environment, that is, to render the world of things into a direct projection of the world of the human mind.<sup>4</sup>*

All these tendencies before and after World War I laid the foundation of an industrial culture that resonated with the spread of machine production and the human being involved in the system. Mass communication technologies provided this culture with new means of expression; machines provided it with new frameworks and materials. Humans who, until then, had been dependent on nature's primeval forces and natural materials, and who saw their highest ideals in the manifestations of nature, became dependent on technology and its manifestations. Not only did the machine become a new tool, it became a new goal and a symbol. Human beings, who had felt that they were a part of living nature, were cast into an artificial environment of which they did not feel as yet a part. The adaptation to new conditions demanded a new aesthetic system, a new artistic culture that I would call *objective*. That is to say, it is not connected with the chaotic forces of nature, yet it is bound to the logic of an artificial environment, to the intellect of the human being at a higher level. The artificial environment, the world of machines is the manifestation of human intellectual achievement, similarly to art culture.

The formation of industrial culture is, first of all, related to the emergence and development of new means of expression that brought movement and change to 20th-century art and contributed to the rise of new trends. Many critics have seen this constant replacement of new,

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4 Lapin's translation differs from the original. "We must invent and rebuild our Futurist city like an immense and tumultuous shipyard, active, mobile, and everywhere dynamic, and the Futurist house like a gigantic machine. . . . That architecture must be understood as the attempt, to be pursued with freedom and boldness, to harmonize man and his environment, that is, to render the world of things into a direct projection of the world of the human mind." Antonio Sant' Elia, "Futurist Architecture," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 200–201.

short-lived movements by others as a crisis in 20th-century art, art becoming decadent. Recently however, it has turned out that some art movements from the beginning of the 20th century, such as Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, and Surrealism, have reappeared in new contexts and on new scales, in a synthesis of new and old methods. The changes in the 20th century should not be seen as chaotic, but rather as a continuous process of synthesis, which crystallizes the artistic means of expression most suitable for industrial culture. Conceptualism, which ignores the old notion of form, reintroduces ideas that had been lost during the search for new means of expression and, by taking materials from the actual world, redefines the notion of form.

It is the tradition of subjective art, dealing with moods, forms, and colors, which is in crisis. The constant change of forms and colors, the eclectic combination of formal systems of various subjective art movements leads to the decadence of art, and the artist himself has no clear idea why or for whom he is working. The artist takes art to the point where the presentation of his subjective view of the world becomes art in itself. Subjective art is utterly archetypal, the work of an artist at a certain level corresponds to an unconsciously evolving pattern. Objective art, on the other hand, due to its intellectuality, releases the artist from the constraints of the unconscious, from archetypes. The artist himself starts to produce new archetypes and new symbols, which reflect today's concerns.

Looking back on the historical artistic cultures, the Middle Ages, for example, we will see that it was a fully objectivist culture. All life and art in the Middle Ages was completely subjected to a generally Christian worldview; it encompassed every aspect of a person's life and activity. Art was inseparable from life in the Middle Ages; it only reflected the content of a predetermined way of existence. Modern interpretations of the formal aspects of medieval art, analyses of the deviations of single artists from the canonic scheme of art, are misleading and do not contribute to our understanding of this art. The basis for medieval art was Christianity; deviations resulted either from divergent interpretations of different schools, or from deep meditation, which helped talented artists reach a high level of achievement, but which in the end served a conceptual goal.

By separating some parts of a medieval work of art we might obtain interesting results for today's art history, but the method in its

one-dimensionality does not give us the full picture of a medieval artwork as a whole, which is subjected to one ethical ideal. Neither is it possible to divide medieval art into discrete parts—painting, sculpture, architecture; it should be considered a complex whole, which included the altar, the pulpit, the church, the castle, and the dwelling. Similarly, it is not possible to make a distinction between art and design in medieval everyday items. This wholeness is characteristic of medieval art: rather than speaking of separate genres, we should speak of separate art objects, or objects of medieval culture, to be more precise; they were polyfunctional and included practical, aesthetic, and ethical elements and the three are characteristic of all high cultures, cultures subjected to a single aesthetic ideal. Even the most sophisticated atheist will not tell us whether medieval man was happy or unhappy. Neither am I able to tell you here, but it is highly unlikely that these people if they were unhappy would have left such a vast legacy—a culture, which can be analyzed by art historians today from specifically artistic, by historians from specifically historical, and by theologians from specifically theological points of view.

I introduced the example of the Middle Ages in order to show that objective art existed earlier, in previous cultural and historical periods. And this does not only concern the Middle Ages; it also existed in Egypt, South America, Greece, and the Far East. It seems to me that the objectification of 20th-century art, a consequence of industrialization and the way in which it changed every aspect of human life, will take us toward a similarly integrated culture, when the full range of the relationships between humans and machines is recognized, when the artificial environment will be seen as inseparable from the cosmic environment, when an ethical basis and an ideal is found for this new ecological relationship. Or, maybe we can look at it as [Jindřich] Chaloupecký did: “We understand that the one staying alive will not necessarily be the human being. What remains is the constant change and transformation of matter, something existing before and after consciousness.”<sup>5</sup>

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5 Jindřich Chaloupecký, “Avangardismist kunstis,” in *Visarid, nr 3. Uuemat USA kunstist* (Tartu: Riikliku Ülikooli kunstikabineti laualeht, 1969). Translated from Jindřich Chaloupecký, “Art en 1967,” *Výtvarné umění 10* (1967). The quote in French is slightly modified: “Nous commençons à sentir que ce n’est pas nécessairement l’homme qui a le droit de survivre. Ce qui reste, c’est la puissance féconde de l’univers, l’infinie transformation de la matière, quelque chose qui a existé avant et qui existera après la conscience,”

Now I would like to descend from an endless void to the earth, to our native country. I would like to return to the land of fair-haired and tall Estonians, and other brotherly nations. What is the history of objective art in this country?

I believe that objectivity in Estonian art can be related to the advent of Constructivism in the 1920s, when in 1923 the Estonian Artists' Group was founded. This [group] included such artists as Jaan Vahtra, Eduard Ole, Juhan Raudsepp, Hendrik Olvi, Friedrich Hist, Märt Laarman, Arnold Akberg, and Edmond Blumenfeldt. Throughout the 1920s the Estonian Artists' Group arranged exhibitions in Tallinn, Tartu, Võru, Valga, Pärnu, Viljandi, Rakvere, and elsewhere in Estonia. They also participated in the first Estonian art exhibitions abroad—in Riga, Helsinki, France, and Germany, where their work attracted much attention. Thus a review of the exhibition of Estonian art in Helsinki in 1929 reads: "It is noteworthy that the Constructivist trend—a derivation of Cubism—has found such a large number of supporters among young Estonian artists and that among them are the most accomplished of the younger generation's artists."<sup>6</sup>

The theory of Estonian Constructivism is formulated in the *Book of New Art* (1928). Märt Laarman writes,

*The mission of art is not to copy or imitate existing things, but to create new ones. The material, from which an artwork emerges, is surface, lines and colors. . . . While Impressionism and Futurism that followed it [French Futurism—LL] were in their essence lyrical and feminine, Constructivist art that derived from Cubism has reintroduced the masculine and epic aspects into art. The artist confines his expression to a set of strict rules and by adopting them joins the collective. They say that Constructivist pictures are all similar to one another, they always repeat themselves, and the artist does not express his personality. Considering what was said earlier, it is evident that individualism has nothing to do with new art. Moreover, we are proud that we do not build on the foundation of what is distinct and singular in a person, what separates one person from another, but on the foundation of what*

477. Reference taken from Mari Laanemets, "Kunst kunsti vastu. Kunstniku rolli ja positsiooni ümbermõtestamise katsest eesti kunstis 1970. aastatel," *Kunstiiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 20, nos. 1/2 (2011): 70–71.

6 Märt Laarman, "Eesti kunstinäitus Helsingis," *Taie: Eesti Kunsti Ajakiri* 4 (1929): 63.



*people have in common. As a result of this, new art is international. It is not a fault or a virtue. It is inevitability. Similarly, science and technology are not at fault for becoming international, common to all. . . . Art that entertained or diversified life is now in charge of organizing life.*<sup>7</sup>

These words, which clearly promote objectivity, are still relevant today. And if the aims of objectivity were unclear before, they should be comprehensible after Laarman's clear and unambiguous wording.

The traditions of the Estonian Artists' Group are upheld by the painter Arnold Akberg, who, although advanced in years, had a solo exhibition at the Art Hall last year. It is a shame that the oeuvre of this master has not been properly honored in Estonia; consequently, the wider public is largely unacquainted with objectivity as a living tradition.

After a period of a vulgar interpretation of art, the creation of objective art was possible again starting from the mid 1960s, when Kaljo Põllu came to Tartu and the art group ANK '64 was founded in Tallinn on Tõnis Vint's initiative. At the youth exhibition held in Tallinn in 1966, Kaljo Põllu showed two Op-Art works, which were the first publicly exhibited Op-Art and objective art works in Soviet Estonia. At the same exhibition Tõnis Vint (presenting systems of signs) and, to some extent, Lembit Sarapuu (showing a composition with a hand) displayed objective art. There were some other artists, whose works included some elements free from the imitation or interpretation of reality, but, on the whole, artworks in the Expressionist, Fauvist, Cubist, and Surrealist mode dominated. In the subsequent years Tõnis Vint of the ANK '64 group proceeded to objectivity, and is still engaged in exploring architectonic and structuralist systems of signs. He is a theorist and a consummate representative of objectivity in Estonian art of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. On a parallel track to Tõnis Vint, another artist to be associated with objectivity is Malle Leis, on whose paintings flowers have become a kind of sign, although the decorativeness of her paintings often overshadows their objectivist perspective. Aili Vint, who, a few years ago, exhibited her optical paintings, successfully applying objectivist principles, has

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7 Märt Laarman, *Uue Kunsti Raamat. Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhma almanak* (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhm, 1928), 7–8.

recently turned her attention to seascapes. Some elements of objective art have appeared in the works of Jüri Arrak; his best-known objectivist work—an object with people who are eating—was exhibited at the Art Hall last year.

After producing optical objects in 1966, Kaljo Põllu made a series of spatial objects—the “things”—which once again were the first “pure” objects exhibited in Estonia. In addition to being a creative artist, Kaljo Põllu was a leader in modern art in Tartu; he started the art group called Visarid and initiated the distribution of a number of manuscripts on objective art, which had a substantial influence on Estonian artists. Kaljo Põllu was also the first to introduce the ready-made technique into graphic arts, being for some time in the vanguard of progressive Estonian printmaking. Kaljo Põllu and the Visarid group initiated several youth and solo exhibitions in the Tartu University cafeteria, introducing to a Tartu audience the most avant-garde developments and objective tendencies in Estonian art. Sadly, this active person left Tartu in 1975, and an exciting period in Tartu’s art life ended.

Among the members of the Visarid group, objective art was most consistently practiced by Rein Tammik, currently a painter, and Peeter Urbla, currently an art critic, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In recent years they have continued, although not along the same lines, except that Rein Tammik’s works are still permeated by a certain objectivist attitude toward reality.

After the core members of the ANK group had left the Estonian State Art Institute in 1966, a new group of young artists practicing objective art emerged. Every spring they showed their work primarily at the Independent Works Exhibition in the Art Institute, a tradition started by the ANK ’64 group. The Independent Works Exhibition in 1968, for example, offered the public a *kinetic object* by Kalju Simson, a Dadaist sculpture made from rain pipes by Vilen Künnapu, and a rubber object by Leida Ilo.

In 1969 Andres Tolts and Ando Keskküla participated in the Estonian State Art Institute exhibition for the first time, showing their Pop Art paintings, in which they applied local materials, colors, and motifs in their grotesque reality.

A large exhibition—with seventy works—took place in 1970, when a number of works typical of objective art were shown. This exhibition was the second major event of modern and contemporary art after the

ANK '64 show in 1965, yet this time the tendency toward objectivity was clearly visible.

As the Independent Works Exhibition in 1971 demonstrated, the artists continued their explorations and investigations in the field of Pop Art. The quality of the works was higher, and they were more ambitious than at previous exhibitions. The exhibition culminated in a happening or live action—the painting of a children's playground on Heina Street with a large elephant at its center; this happening brought together the core practitioners of contemporary objective art in Estonia. It was the final event in a series of happenings arranged by SOUP '69 in the years 1968–70. At that point the period of objective art that had emerged from the State Art Institute ended.

On the basis of these Art Institute exhibitions, a group of artists engaged in objective art formed under the name SOUP '69. The group's core members included Andres Tolts and Ando Keskküla, as well as Leonhard Lapin, and they first exhibited under this name at the Pegasus Café in 1969, and a year later in the Tallinn Art Salon. From 1968 to 1971 the group held numerous exhibitions in different venues, in offices and factories, and organized discussions and Pop Art evenings to introduce and analyze Pop and objective art that had made its way into Estonia.

In 1970 an exhibition under the title “Estonian Progressive Art” at the Pegasus Café brought together the core members of SOUP '69 and the Visarid group. The exhibition demonstrated an objectivist approach to art and can be considered a precursor for today's exhibition in Harku. When compared to the current exhibition, however, the Pegasus exhibit featured fewer works and showed more uniformity, yet it was most unexpected.

The tradition of the annual exhibitions of independent works continues at the Estonian State Art Institute to this day, showing objectivist works created by students. Some participants in the current exhibition, such as Silvi Allik, Silver Vahtre, Jaan Ollik, Villu Järmut, Sirje Lapin, and Jüri Okas, were first showcased at the Independent Works Exhibitions.

The large-scale group exhibition Saku '73, held in 1973, has definitely been one of the most significant of contemporary art events in Estonia in recent years.

In addition to group and thematic exhibitions, the practitioners of objective art have presented their work at a number of solo shows and,

with the kind permission of the juries, have taken part in almost all annual surveys at the Tallinn Art Hall, although with a small number of works, and have thus perhaps remained unnoticed.

Raul Meel, who has stayed outside the abovementioned groups and art school circles, and who works independently, should be looked at separately. In 1969 he first addressed the notion and practice of geometric structuralism and concrete poetry. To date he has held solo exhibitions in Tallinn in 1970, 1971, 1973, and in Tartu in 1970 (including an object inscribed with a poem in Tartu in 1971). In 1971–72 he created the “portraits” of Estonian writers—proper names—a pioneering work of concrete poetry in Estonia. In 1969, in an article printed in the magazine *Noorus* [*Youth*] he explained his theoretical views. Raul Meel has won several international awards and is one of the Laureates of International Print Triennials.

I would also point out the work of Kaarel Kurismaa who participated in the Independent Works Exhibitions at the Estonian State Art Institute, and who was a contemporary of the members of SOUP '69, but worked independently of them. Starting in 1967 he produced kinetic art objects. In 1973 he had his first solo exhibition in Tallinn. In the spring of 1975 he arranged multimedia performances which took place during rock music concerts at the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute.

This year Sirje (Runge) Lapin graduated from the Estonian State Art Institute. Her graduate work *A Proposal for the Design of the Areas in the Central Part of Tallinn* was the first attempt to study the application of the principles of objective art and multimedia in urban environmental design in Tallinn. The work was shown during the Congress of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design in Moscow, where it attracted much attention.

All these facts have been presented to demonstrate that a considerable tradition of objective art has been built up in Estonia. When we add to this that objectivist principles have been put into practice in Estonian architecture, urban planning, industrial design, and mass media—television, radio, and press (as long as they do not contradict their own means of expression or do not simply echo traditional forms of art)—we can say that we already have one foot in the new objectivist culture.

Unfortunately, the wider public or common people are unaware of objectivist art, and our art institutions and cultural establishments

have not done much to introduce and popularize it. Even recently the truly strange idea was put forward that mainstream Estonian art should be lyrical and romantic, and that the manifestations of objective art are accidental and deviate from the mainstream. In fact, to speak of mainstream Estonian art is to push the argument to absurdity; only in retrospect can we say that.

Thus, I would like to present an idea of two parallel traditions that exist in Estonia today. One is the “lyrical-romantic” trend, a mixture of Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, Expressionist, and Cubist styles, which, in its own way, continues the traditions of the Pallas Art School. Yet this art only appeals to the senses, creating new works of art through the eclectic synthesis of different stylistic currents from the interwar period. Several artists of younger generations have joined the ranks of these artists, introducing the devices of Pop Art and Hyperrealism into their work. Thus a “national art” tradition is created, which is nothing but a combination of artistic styles imported from Europe and a mediocre culture of color and form.

Personally, I am not opposed to art that is grounded in the actual world and interprets reality impressionistically and from the point of view of the artist’s subjectivity; the majority of our urban population have moved to the city from the country only recently or a generation ago, and Estonian urban culture is still in the process of development. And until now Estonia also lacks a modern metropolis that, with its new visions and systems, would invade one’s consciousness and instill in it the spirit of industrial culture. Our people, unaccustomed to the new ways, still cling to the old, though changed and changing, ways.

This lyrical and romantic trend in Estonian art seems to be entirely nostalgic, wallows in decadence, and is stagnant though beautiful. With its plasticity of color or form it offers only a certain kind of sensuous pleasure, but it is of no use for environmental design—it will usually be in contradiction to the new environment. This is also one of the causes of the crisis in Estonian sculpture and monumental art: they are branches of visual art closest to architecture, and it is high time that new technologies be used that change art culture.

Works of the lyrical-romantic current can only be experienced as works of art; they do not naturally become parts of reality, they are not objects, or things. The artist’s subjective experience, in one way or

another, erects a wall between the viewer and the work. From here the issue of educating the viewer, the problem of explaining art arises.

Objective art, which, at the present moment, is in the experimental, laboratory research stage, can be very subjective, but it has embarked on a pursuit of a universal language of artistic expression. Its aim is to become an indivisible part of the new industrial reality, of the artificial environment. Its aim is to give form to a new environment, to solve the problem of the human-machine relationship.

Considering the above, we can look at the current exhibition, on the one hand, as a natural continuation of the tradition of objective art in Estonia; on the other hand, it can also be seen as a continuation of the subjective, lyrical-romantic tradition in art: this is because in almost all the works presented here the artist's hand is visible; the local tradition of form, color, and presentation is felt in spite of the works' objective and conceptualist overtones. This proves that the present exhibition is closely tied to Estonian art life today, it is not a minor deviation. It is a general tendency in today's Estonia, and, in addition to the artists participating in the current show, there are a number of others who work in the same direction.

I would like to point out the common cause of all the shortcomings of this exhibition, which is a lack of resources. As objective art is closely related to new materials, new manufacturing techniques, and new means of expression such as electronics and multimedia, it needs large resources and the support of public organizations and state institutions. Without these resources, the quality of this art will not be improved even in ten years' time.

Or, it will develop along the model of conceptualist art: art as a fact of reality, art as an act of life. By recording the facts of reality and treating them creatively, without paying attention to artistic media, everyone can practice art everywhere, whoever thinks it necessary and wants to be an artist, disregarding the outcome and its social acceptance. In this way, every human being is an artist, just like every human being is a human being. 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. Still, some inner activity, or at least a concrete relationship with reality is needed, and the inspiration is found in the intellectual sphere and its representatives, the intellectuals.

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. Interplanetary space will be the place to celebrate them. If we reject the enormous opportunity that is within our reach today, and if we predict that excessive mechanization will lead to the destruction of the culture we want to achieve, we will empty out the freedom of action, creation, thought, and seeing; and in doing so we will negate the human being.<sup>8</sup>

Leonhard Lapin, December 13, 1975

A speech delivered at the symposium  
and the exhibition Harku '75

TRANSLATION BY ANDRES KURG AND KRISTA MITS

**NOTE** *This text is the first English translation of the Estonian original, published in Leonhard Lapin, "Objektiivne kunst," in Valimik artikleid ja ettekandeid kunstist 1967–1977 [Selected articles and presentations on art 1967–1977] (Tallinn, 1977), 48–63. All footnotes are by Andres Kurg.*

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8 The last paragraph is almost a direct quote from Pierre Restany's *Livre blanc—objet blanc* (Milan: Éditions Apollinaire, 1969). The text was available to Lapin through its Finnish translation, published as a supplement to the yearbook of Finnish art *Taide* in 1970. See Pierre Restany, *Valkoinen kirja* (Porvoo, Finland: WSOY, 1970), 72.