

The Representation of Soviet Urbanscape as Alienation and Loneliness in Estonian Hyperrealist Paintings of the 1970s

Cristina Morandi

The first experiments in Hyperrealism took place in Estonia in the second half of the 1970s by artists such as Ando Keskküla, Lemming Nagel, Heitti Polli, Urmas Pedanik, Tõnu Virve and Jaan Elken.¹ These artists engaged the urban environment, both interiors and the cityscape, in a figurative style that was both understandable to local viewers and recognizable at the level of everyday life, in order to represent the actual conditions of the society in which they were living.

In the painting *Good Night* (Figure 1), for example, Lemming Nagel depicts the interior of a house, focusing almost exclusively on a television and an open window. Although at first they could appear to be odd subjects for an artwork, the hidden meaning of the painting is revealed by the juxtaposition of the two objects. Here the artist probably refers to the important role which television took in the Estonian citizen's everyday life, by establishing a connection with their northern neighbor Finland.² The Scandinavian country became a metaphorical window to the outside world not influenced by the Soviet propaganda.

However, even at the beginning of the movement, the Hyperrealist works raised some negative criticism. Most contemporary Soviet art historians believed that the technique displayed nothing more than a bland transference of a photo to a painting.³

The negation of Hyperrealism's creative contribution to the artistic scene characterized not only the critics' assessment, but also the nonconformist artists' response. According to the Estonian artist and architect Leonhard Lapin, a well established figure in the unofficial scene, the return to a "depictive" style by Hyperrealism was the ultimate capitulation to the totalitarian system embodied by Socialist Realism. Hyperrealism betrayed the avant-garde's ideals of identity and freedom by compromising with the official style approved by Soviet authorities.

The basis for this harsh criticism from the nonconformist art community could be ascribed to the semi-official exhibition *Harku '75 Objects, Concepts*⁴ that was held in the town of Harku, in Estonia, as part of an official occasion on which young artists were to meet with members of Soviet scientific institutions. The exhibition, which lasted one week, provoked stimulated exchanges and discussion between the public and artists; during the event, one hundred-fifty participants introduced to their audience the most influential developments in Estonian alternative art since the 1960s such as kinetic pop sculptures, large-scale installations, concrete poetry and geometric abstract works.

At the symposium organized at the end of the event, Leonhard Lapin underlined a significant issue for the art of the time: the need for artists to engage with the new industrially-manufactured environment and the technological progress that the country was experiencing.⁵

As a matter of fact, the Soviet Union has always placed great emphasis on science and technology as essential elements for the overall economic expansion of the country. In the 1960s, the production of consumer goods was prioritized, specifically household goods and electronic devices, such as refrigerators and washing machines, which would decrease the intensity of housework. These new appliances began their gradual entrance into the market, changing the living standards of Soviet citizens. In the same decade, urban development was dominated by an extensive program of construction of new apartment buildings all around the Soviet Union. The raising of new neighborhoods, extending the housing capacity of cities, required a large-scale urban planning effort. New development took place on the outskirts of the urban areas, forcing the incorporation of suburbs or undeveloped land into the preexisting urban structure. This had a significant impact both on the citizens' social life and

¹ Estonia was the first country, in the Soviet Union, where Hyperrealism and Photorealism developed in a more coherent way, and works were allowed to be publicly displayed by Soviet authorities.

² As a matter of fact, during the 1970s and 1980s, northern Estonia received television signals from Finnish television whose broadcasts became more popular than the Soviet-Estonian shows.

³ The Estonian critic Enn Pöldross extended the appraisal to Estonian Hyperrealist artists as well. He pointed out their lack of professionalism as well as their insecurity about interpreting the style's philosophy. Enn Pöldross, "Noortenäitusest ajendatuna," *Sirp ja Vasar*, 21 November 1975.

⁴ In the catalogue of the exhibition Lapin affirmed that "In 1970s together with the emergence of super realism which partly overlapped with socialist realism, several young artists, having combined these two, found themselves all of a sudden treated as both "modern" and "official." It was at the period of Harku 1975 show when the split between the "depictive" artists—those actually compromising with the official art—and "nondepictive" artists—i.e. those following the hard way of avant-garde—began to emerge." Leonhard Lapin, "Twenty Years Later," in *Harku 1975-1995* (Tallinn: As Pakett, 1995), 62.

⁵ Ibid.

on the city's public space: the emergence of monotonous, giant, high-rise communal housing in the suburbs contributed to the establishment of different mono-functional zones disconnected from each other, that increased the ghettoization of working class citizens.

Lapin's speech at *Harku '75* that advocated for an active role of the artist in transforming society raises two important questions: what was the position of the artistic community toward the development of the contemporary society, and why did Lapin attack the Hyperrealist works with such vehemence? The historical and political context in which Lapin's generation of artists was raised has a significant role in answering them.

In the 1940s the Red Army took over the Baltic governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and declared them official members of the Soviet Union. A process of Sovietization accompanied the Baltic States' incorporation as Soviet republics, which included the prohibition of using national flags and symbols, the silencing of political opposition, and the adoption of Russian as the official language.

A significant aspect of this process involved the control and re-organization of the social and intellectual spheres of these countries. All local artists' associations were eliminated and replaced by the centralized system of Soviet artistic unions. The art production was placed in the service of the Communist party, and Socialist Realism became the official style. Local artists were pressured to create only works that presented a glorified image of Soviet life, featuring idealized representations of workers (Figure 2), peasants and Communist party leaders. Attempts to assert creative independence were met with severe punishment such as prison sentences, exile or execution.

Following Stalin's death, in 1953, a period now known as the Thaw commenced, and his successor Nikita Khrushchev allowed for the relaxation of the Party structures and the restoration of some personal liberties. Artists could eventually focus, both in Russia and in the Baltic countries, on the exploration of previously forbidden modernist styles and movements, publicly displaying their abstract, expressionist, surrealist and conceptual works.

In the first half of the 1960s the renewed restrictions imposed by the State under Leonid Brezhnev's administration led to a clear separation between the official culture and the nonconformist movements that opposed it. Artists went back to the private sphere,⁶ embracing artistic autonomy detached from the current political and social situation. The

artist's inner life came to stand for what each individual considered was the true reality, an approach to the surrounding world which was separated from the manipulative ideological language of the official Socialist Realism (Figure 3).

By advocating an active role for the artist in society, Lapin was clearly urging artists to move from the margins of unofficial artistic production to the center of the Soviet public sphere. Lapin's statements also called for artists to imagine new alternatives to impact the urban environment that was ruled by inflexible building regulations, Soviet mass constructions, and dictated by the Central Committee based in Moscow. In this context, he identified architecture and design as the most suitable disciplines to fulfill this goal. His speech had an impact on artists like Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken who both had training in architecture and design before turning to painting.⁷ Architecture remained the subject of their works, a language through which they interpreted the contemporary social and political situation and developed their own personal criticism of it.

In fact, in the 1960s Nikita Khrushchev's policies "solved" the housing shortage for the State by building as many urban units as quickly and cheaply as possible. Quality was to be sacrificed for quantity to deal with the growing population and the relocation of family units. The new housing revealed construction defects, cracks in the walls, unfinished façades and drainage problems. This reality would become the subject of Ando Keskküla⁸ and Jaan Elken's works in the second half of the 1970s. They focused primarily on anonymous buildings in the residential area of Tallinn, Estonia's capital. Keskküla's painting *Building* (Figure 4), representing a series of decrepit walls in an empty interior and a neon light laying against the wall to indicate the lack of electricity and the state of abandonment of the edifice, clearly displays these poor living conditions.

Moreover, by elevating the segments of the urban landscape as exclusive subjects of the artistic discourse, both Keskküla and Elken transformed them in the allegory of an existential condition of loneliness and abandonment.

The exhibition *Harku '75* constituted a distinctive moment for the unofficial art of the period, bringing to the surface the recurrent polemic on the critical efficacy of Realism as a strategy of resistance to official norms. In fact, although the Hyperrealist artists exposed the duplicity of the alleged wealth of Soviet society and its oppressive system, their works attracted some criticism from the nonconformist scene of the period which condemned their supposed affin-

⁶ An increasing desire for privacy, along with the impossibility of being part of the State Artist Union, drove the unofficial artists to organize exhibitions in private apartments within their small circles of friends, where they tried to keep the debate alive on the state of contemporary art.

⁷ Ando Keskküla graduated as a designer and architect from the industrial art department at Tallinn University in 1973. However, in the second half of the '60s, Keskküla's association with Estonian Pop Art, which included artists like Leonhard Lapin and Andres Tolts, influenced

the artist's belief in documenting the environment, or intervening in it directly through design. Jaan Elken completed his studies at the Estonian State Art Institute in 1977 in architecture. He then worked for two years as an architect at the Tallinn Head Office of Architecture and Planning.

⁸ Ando Keskküla is considered the artist who introduced Hyperrealism in Estonia and one of the first to employ airbrush in the creation of his paintings.

ity with Socialist Realism. The return to a figurative style was viewed as a compromise in order to satisfy both the Soviet authorities' dictates and popular tastes.

The difference between the nonconformist artists of the period and Keskküla and Elken is based on the fact that the nonconformists' idea of reengaging with the urban environment through a new art actually embodied a utopian representation of the city's architecture rather than offering practical solutions. Meanwhile both Keskküla and Elken created a powerful critique of Soviet authority precisely by representing figuratively the "anti-humanity" of the Soviet urban environment. Through this strategy the two artists were able to subvert the predominant Soviet rhetoric and diminish Socialist Realism's credibility as an objective portrayal of reality.

Keskküla and Elken's semiotic approach to architecture should be attributed to the influence of the Russian philosopher Juri Lotman and his school, the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, which was founded in 1964 in the town of Tartu, in Estonia. According to Lotman's theory, semiotics should be understood as the extension of linguistic methods to objects, which are not included in traditional linguistics. Rather than define "culture" only according to the specialized discipline of linguistics, he conceived the study of culture as a total field. This method also allowed a productive understanding of the use of different languages of culture, including architecture. As a matter of fact, the Sovietization of Tallinn's urbanscape is seen by both Keskküla and Elken as a complex text that must be interpreted in order to unveil the political and social influence that it has on collective consciousness and memory.

Through an objective and rational representation of the urbanscape and its interiors Keskküla developed a personal critique toward the alienation the Soviet environment generates in the Estonian inhabitants.⁹ In the painting *Evening* (Figure 5), for example, the insulating foam squeezed between the wall blocks symbolizes the visual discrepancy between the new Soviet architecture imposed in the 1960s and the preexistent Estonian urbanscape. It is possible that here Keskküla is alluding to the residential districts of Mustamäe and Lasnamäe built in 1962 and 1973. These faceless residential complexes, radically different from the historical buildings in the center of Tallinn, became the emblem in the 1970s of the negative impact of the imposed new Soviet mass housing on the city's historical identity.

The detritus gathered against the central wall refers to the poor and cheap material employed during the construction

of the Soviet housing. The fact that the detritus covers the ground almost completely could allude to the filling out of Soviet apartments with consumer goods, whose production was massively increased in the 1960s.

Realistic shadows, giving the impression of wall sections, frame the composition and at the same time convey the illusion to the viewer of peering into the room. The apparent coherent materiality of the scene is broken by a pair of black squares on the windows facing outside. The opposition between the black squares and the slippage of trees in the dual landscape symbolically refers to the architecturally aggressive imposition of the Soviet man-made environment on the Estonian untouched countryside. Lastly, the total absence of any human being in the apartment, along with the repetitive sequence of the room, reinforces the idea of abandonment and loneliness that pervaded the monotonous buildings of Lasnamäe and Mustamäe and their inhabitants. With *Evening* Keskküla is able to convey through the representation of an anonymous house interior an ensemble of signs that once decoded unveil hidden meanings referring to an existential condition. Furthermore, the composition of the painting and the double identical point of view of the space suggest to the viewer the idea that the scene represented is not just a copy of reality but also a reality constructed by the artist himself.¹⁰

Jaan Elken's perspective moves from the interior of Soviet housing to the working class districts of Tallinn. In the painting *Väike-Õismäe* (Figure 6), the artist shows the alienation of such an urbanscape by depicting a gloomy and deserted bus stop in the district of Haabersti, with its monotonous buildings dominating the background. The sense of desolation that pervades the painting is reinforced by the use of cold and pure colors, and by the upside down glasses on the lower right side, which while being the only trace of human presence also emphasize the abandonment of the scene.

Characteristic of Elken's style is the insertion of his subjectivity and personal experience in his works. As Kädi Talvoja pointed out, "He does observe the contemporary city with an indifferent photographic eye, but leaves his mark—"I was here."¹¹ The artist's subjectivity is expressed through the painterly brushwork and the insertion of abstract areas of color in the otherwise nearly photographic image. As a matter of fact, Elken's compositions are based on photos, taken by the artist himself, of city streets, buildings and prohibition signs, which were part of his everyday experience.¹²

Elken's work *In the Kalinin District* (Figure 7) is charged with hidden mordant implications and poignant emotional

⁹ According to Anu Liivak, Keskküla's object "is not only the effect of estrangement coming into being when depicting in painting with exact preciseness the photographic image, but also his own attitude toward the motive. The latter is attractive for the artist as real although dinaesthetic in the traditional sense, and a structure providing interesting possibilities for artistic interpretation." Anu Liivak, "Let's stay Estonians, let's become European" in *Myth and Abstraction. Actual Art from Estonia*, ed. G. Braun (Estonia: Karlsruhe, 1992), 42.

¹⁰ According to Jeremy Canwell, here Keskküla is "challenging the concept of neutrality which was imbedded in photographic reproduction

at the hands of Soviet authority, both in the press and in official art." Jeremy Canwell, "Modern Translation: Estonian Art From the National Awakening to the Brezhnev Stagnation" (PhD diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2012), 197.

¹¹ Kädi Talvoja, "Eesti Hüperrealism—Kompromisside Kunst" (bachelor's thesis, Estonian Academy of Arts, 2001), 51.

¹² Elken stated in his biography that "the environment was defined by countless of individual objects and street signs specific to the era. A traffic sign on the wall of a building had a preferential position com-

associations. A close up image of the sign of the Kopli Hotel, with its Russian translation, is combined together with the image of a derelict façade. The peeling paint and the provisional electrical wiring alongside of the pretentious bilingual light box sign become the symbol of the sense of alienation generated on a daily basis on the Estonian-speaking population by the Russification of the city's street signs.

A street sign is also the center of the work *On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street* (Figure 8). Here Elken's photorealist approach is combined with highly tactile brush strokes, which evokes in the viewer a sense of decay and misery typical of Soviet working class districts. Further, pairing a collapsing Soviet building along with an intact street sign named after the national poetess, Lidia Koidula, and the street named after Leiner, an Estonian revolutionary, allows Elken to reclaim the active opposition of the Estonian cultural sphere toward Soviet occupation.

pared to the interplay of windows and doors. Architecture (...) here attracts the detritus of lives, the time and memories." Harry Liivrand,

In conclusion, it is possible to affirm that Estonian Hyperrealism was not in collusion with Socialist Realism. On the contrary, it demonstrated that there is a new perspective to approach the concept of Realism in the Soviet Union. By going back to a figurative style, Hyperrealist artists like Ando Keskküla and Jaan Elken challenged the Socialist Realist view of the world. They exposed the other side of the Soviet "modernized and industrialized environment," showing the city of Tallinn under Soviet occupation as a place of abandonment, loneliness, inhumanity and solitude. By subverting the predominant Soviet rhetoric but still remaining committed to a figurative style, these artists also contributed to problematizing the discourse on the perception of reality and the credibility of Realism as a representational method in the Soviet Union.

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

"Identity: Painter," in *Jaan Elken*, ed. Jaan Elken, exhibition catalogue (Tallinn: Eesti Kultuurkapital, 2011), 105.

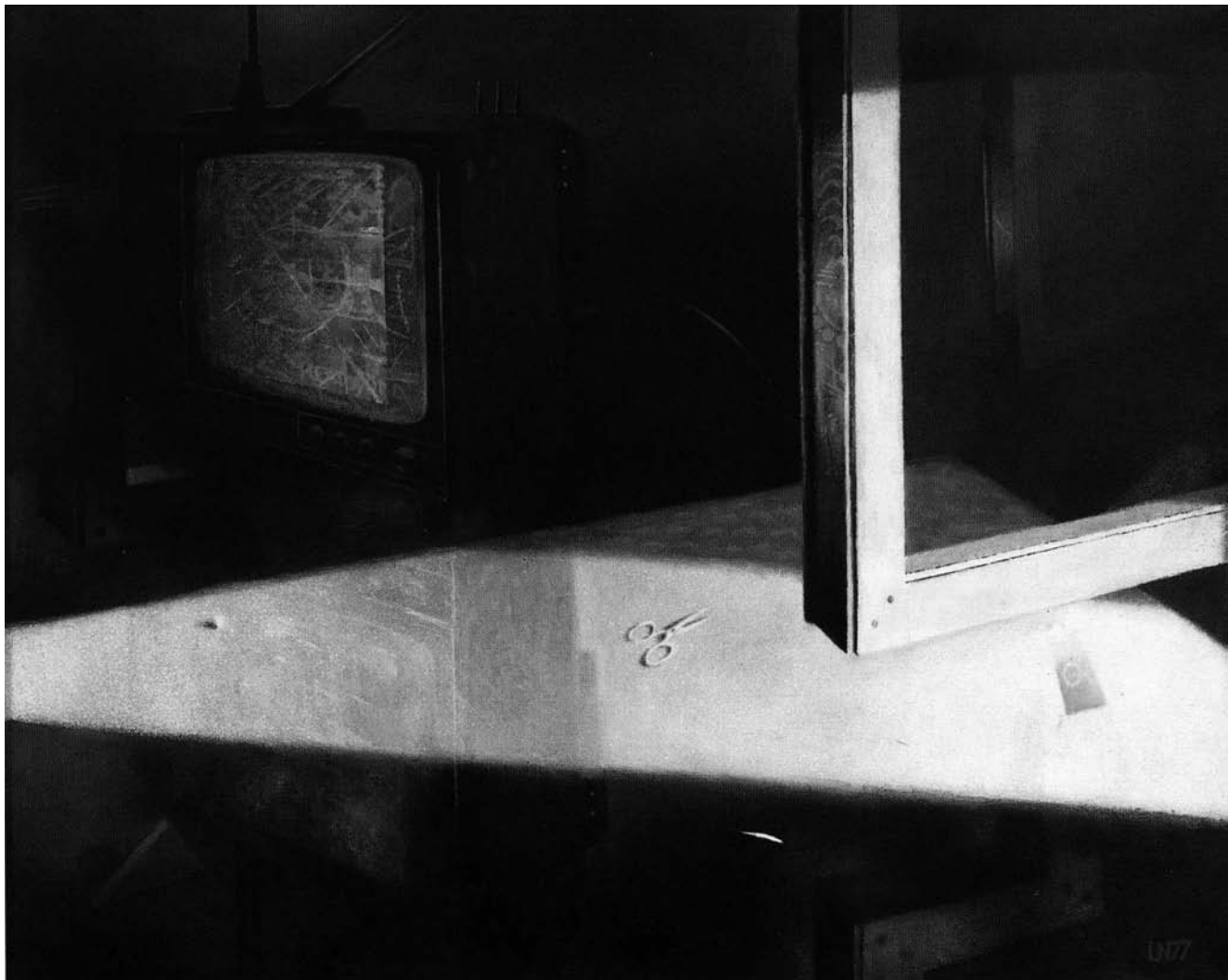


Figure 1. Lemming Nagel, *Good Night*, 1977, oil on canvas, 100 x 125 cm. Tallinn Art Hall Foundation, Estonia. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / EAU, Tallinn.

Figure 2. Mikhail Alekseevich Kostin, *In the Stalin Factory*, 1949, oil on canvas, 52 x 68 inches (132.08 x 172.72 cm). Springville Museum of Art. Gift of Jerald H. Jacobs.



Figure 3. [above left] Vladimir Nemukhin (Russian, b. 1925), *Composition*, 1961, oil on canvas, 157 x 107.5 cm (61 13/16 x 42 5/16 inches). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, 1992.0548/07849. Photo credit: Jack Abraham.

Figure 4. [above right] Ando Keskküla, *Building*, 1976, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm. Tallinn Art Hall Foundation, Estonia.



Figure 5. Ando Keskküla, *Evening*, 1975, oil on canvas. Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn.



Figure 6. Jaan Elken, *Väike-Õismäe*, 1981, oil on canvas, 114 x 146 cm. Tallinn Art Hall Foundation, Estonia. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / EAU, Tallinn.



Figure 7. Jaan Elken, *In the Kalinin District*, 1978, oil on canvas, 114 X 146 cm. Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / EAU, Tallinn.



Figure 8. Jaan Elken, *On the Corner of Koidula and Leineri Street*, 1978, oil on canvas, 100 x 145 cm. Private collection, Estonia. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / EAU, Tallinn.