

The Soviet Absurd

Estonian art of the 1960s against the backdrop of existentialism

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The article examines existentialism as one possible backdrop to Estonian art of the 1960s through three topics that emerged in art writing: the 'philosophical' nature of art, the question of 'artistic image' and the essence of man. Relying on a model created by Martin Esslin, existentialism and the perception of the absurd are partially differentiated. The article also points out the peculiarity of the perception of the absurd in the Cold War-era countries of the Eastern bloc, focusing on 'moderate modernism' ('rough style') and the impact of surrealism in Estonian painting and graphic art.

Summary

Discussions of existentialism constituted one of the principal features in Estonian literary life in the second half of the 1960s, and existentialism was a significant topic in Estonian theatre, primarily via new drama, but also connected with the first productions of absurd drama. Enhanced by various translations of existentialist literature and drama of the absurd (Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Mrozek and Ionesco), existentialism became – although a bit later – just as important in shaping the perception of life as it had been in Western culture in the 1940s and 1950s. The new philosophical attitudes were most directly expressed in literature and drama. In the treatment of Estonian visual art of the same time, the influence of existentialism has not been properly examined; in any case, the influence is mostly blended with other phenomena and can only rarely be distinguished in specific works of art. However, if we ignore existentialism, it would make it impossible to fully perceive a significant, if vague, dimension in the Estonian art of the 1960s.

In Western modernist post-war art, existentialism only found a few direct forms of expression (informalism, abstract expressionism, and happenings that aspired towards authenticity and a more intense sense of presence) and, compared to theatre and literature, exhausted itself fairly quickly. However, thanks to various forms of compromise emerging in the art of several Eastern bloc countries, which expanded the boundaries of official art (the new forms were unable to totally abandon the narrative element, but tried to expand the messages and bring them more up to date, as well as advancing the ways of conveying them), there were

more opportunities there. The presence of existentialism in the Estonian art of the 1960s can mainly be mentioned in connection with two phenomena – the up-to-date version of official art, ‘moderate modernism’ and the ‘rough style’, and surrealism, which inspired young artists but, as far as official art was concerned, it remained in an insecure position. In the work of several artists, these phenomena were supplemented by the impact of the youth culture of the 1960s, thus forming rather contradictory combinations. The happenings of the young Estonian artists in the 1960s have been briefly tackled as well. Quite a few of these happenings aimed to express the perception of the absurd spontaneously and as ‘authentically’ as possible.

Unlike the Western culture of the 1960s, in Estonia was preferred existentialism that avoided political discourse but, thanks to the translative nature of society and the processing of information, the different and occasionally conflicting trends of existentialism could have been understood as uniform. One of the starting points of the current article is the difference between the perception of the absurd in Western and Eastern bloc countries, which has been quite widely noted. In other words, there was an understanding that the drama of the absurd perceived as apolitical in the West turned out to be suitable in describing East-European reality, and thus (without being openly political or social) portrayed daily frustrations quite precisely. Examining existential attitudes and the sense of the absurd expressed in various art forms, the article relies on Martin Esslin’s division to differentiate between existentialist and absurd drama. The former expresses the irrationality of the human condition

in a transparent and logically construed form, while in the latter this is achieved by publicly discarding all rational means and discursive thinking.

The current article examines the emergence of existentialist attitudes and the perception of the absurd in art through three topical themes in the Estonian art writing of the middle and second half of the 1960s: first, the issue of art’s ‘philosophical’ nature emerging together with the modernised language of form; secondly, discussions about ‘artistic image’ that started with examining the work of young graphic artists of the late 1950s; and thirdly, disputes about human beings in general, including the depiction of man in art and the artist’s role, being a human being and the position of the individual in society.

‘Philosophical’ meant that problems tackled in art became more elaborate and deeper and, at the same time, there was a wish to generalise more. This was expressed in an expanded range of topics, as well as in the changed language of form, which led to more conditionality, more complicated images, and greater diversity of viewpoints. The wish to depict the world wholly and allegorically found an outlet in stressing the relations between man and the environment. Man was often shown as lonely, and occasionally as alienated and tormented; the environment was grim, sometimes horrifying or machine-like. This kind of painful man-environment opposition is primarily evident in the paintings of Nikolai Kormašov in the 1960s (*Ferro-concrete*, 1965, and *Mealtime*, 1968), but also in Enn Põldroos’s work (*Mealtime*, 1969, and *War Refugees*, 1968). Looking at the work of these two and some other artists of the same era, it seems that, even if existentialism was not a synonym for

'philosophy', these two at least focused on the possibilities of man's existence in the world, his feelings and ability to find contact with the world. In terms of that aspect, the forms of existentialism in the West and in the Eastern bloc were not that different; in the local culture of the 1960s, existentialism fulfilled a relatively similar function as in the West in the 1940s and 1950s, making it possible to deal with humans and the world as a whole, and to make generalisations, but also to avoid the directly social and political. However, a clearer difference between the attitudes that developed under the two political circumstances emerged in how the perception of the absurd was expressed; such expressions primarily appeared in Estonian art in the 1960s through the surrealism discovered by younger artists.

Estonian art criticism of the 1960s was often attracted to the question of 'artistic image', its essence and autonomy. The idea of an (ambiguous and not entirely self- or form-centred) image separated from reality (liberated from ideological arrangement) and, on the other hand, connected with reality, tried to win back the right for art to be itself, outside the role of confirming ideological values. For many artists of the younger generation, the elaborateness of the structure of the pictures, lively fantasy, combining various elements, and the indeterminacy of what was depicted seemed to become a kind of embodiment of creative freedom. This is evident in the work of several members of the group ANK, especially in Jüri Arrak's paintings in the mid-1960s (*Lava* and *Taxi*, both 1966) and in his drawings. Some interesting examples of surrealism-based imagery, and of clear presence in its own time, can be found in Olav Maran's works (the series *20th Century Grimaces*, 1965). In

creating their imaginative, occasionally almost absurd visions, the artists often did not follow their subconscious impulses, but rather tried to achieve contact with the contemporary world, and cautiously comment on it. Their work can therefore be seen, with certain reservations, as 'Eastern-bloc absurd', which relied on context and not on existential experience. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that this was an aestheticised absurd, where weirdness and comedy emerged from the deep symbolism of complicated and amassed imagery systems. This, however, brought out a certain sublime or liberating dimension.

The Estonian art of the 1960s considerably expanded the ways of depicting man, and it was man who was often the starting point and material of a 'meaningful artistic image'. Two types of works mainly stand out here: pictures focusing on the individual, and works depicting a larger crowd of people or the relations between the individual and the crowd. Two collages, Jüri Arrak's *Officer* (1966) and Jüri Palm's *Seated Man* (1966), show in rather similar methods a generalised and anonymous figure. In both cases, mannequin-like, Kafkaesque characters without faces, 'content' and individuality have been created; at the same time, they aspire to a certain stylishness, to the pop-like superiority of a 'psychologised' depiction of man. An interest in modern life and the perception of that life, and the emergence of some new topics can be observed in works depicting people together and doing things together, especially attending parties. Compared with earlier works, these reflect greater freedom and optimism, and also fascination with the youth culture, a fascination with what was happening 'here

and now'. Against that background, Enn Põldroos's painting *Dance Evening* (1968) is exceptional and contradictory, revealing a conflict between motif and mood and joining the two ideologies of the time: the meeting of a carefree youth culture and existential torment. This torment was, of course, part of the youth culture (especially of the Eastern bloc), which blended various 'philosophical' attitudes and the fashionable state of being blasé.

The most direct expression of the sense of the absurd in Estonian art during the second half of the 1960s involved the nihilist, occasionally childish happenings that were sometimes carried out just for fun, mostly by Art Institute students, especially those belonging to the group SOUP. Placing them together with 'philosophy' in painting and graphic art, a telling pair emerged – the tragedian and jester – which characterised the extreme treatment of man and role models in the art of the 1960s on the axis of existentialism-absurd. Almost all other versions can be fitted in between, the characters expressing both demonstrative emptiness and glamorous anxiety.

The first translations of existentialist texts and the rumour of the drama of the absurd reached the local culture almost simultaneously, and in many cases the different backgrounds – existentialism and the absurd, as well as surrealism and pop art – were quite well blended in the Estonian art of the 1960s. However, that period also exhibited some general changes: the newcomers during the first half of the decade, including members of ANK, were certainly more optimistic, and their occasionally voluptuously elaborate work was essentially still less complicated than the work of the younger artists in the second half of the 1960s,

members of the Visarid or SOUP groups. 'Moderate modernism' also displayed more ambivalence, and the early-decade harsh constructivism was replaced by depictions of an increasingly stagnated and bleak world. At first, the flirtation with the absurd occurred through humour, naivism and dilated aesthetic complexity whereas, in the second half of the 1960s, a different sense of the absurd emerged. This latter form not only manifested the absurdity of the world and man's existence in that world, but also the emptiness of artistic expression, of the possible methods of describing and depicting the world and humankind.

The presence of existentialism in the Estonian art of the 1960s was not as direct as it was in literature and drama, but it nevertheless created a significant backdrop to various other topics and problems emerging in art at that time, by intertwining, directing and shaping them. Most of the Estonian art with an existentialist background focused on the issue of personal freedom and found solutions in creating visions of private worlds of fantasy, in not being open and unambiguously understood, and in not behaving rationally. The starting point of an issue mostly lay in the lack of political and social freedom, and not in perceiving one's harrowing personal freedom. For that reason, the art strategies emerging from such soil could perhaps be called the 'Soviet absurd', which got its impulse from Western culture, but reinterpreted and used it according to the peculiarities of the local context.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
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