

An Insight into Estonian Art Writing 1917– 1928:

From Hanno Kompus to the Group of Estonian Artists

MERLE TANK

The article examines the interpretation of art and the existence and usage of certain terms and ideas in local art writing from 1917 to 1928, in connection with the work produced by the Group of Estonian Artists. Despite different publication dates, all the texts read for this article share quite similar ideas. It can be said that, in formulating the principles of their new art, the members of the Group largely relied on earlier principles, affording the terms that fitted the context of modernism with new and different meanings.

Summary

The current article focuses on art writing in Estonia between 1917 and 1928. On the one hand, it analyses the terms and ideas connected with the meaning and interpretation of art more generally and, on the other, it tries to examine the specific principles of the Group of Estonian Artists (henceforth: Group), against the background of earlier and contemporary local art ideas. The article relies on the understanding that, in formulating the principles of art, the Group members followed earlier ideas and, 'clearing out' the views of modernist art, they afforded the terms with new and different meanings from those existing in local art writing. The terms 'form' and 'art', for example, have essentially different meanings in the work produced by the Group, which is characterised by aspirations towards 'pure' form that represents itself. It can be said that the form innovation in the work of the Group operated both in a visual and a content sense.

The nucleus of the article is made up of conclusions drawn after reading through the selected textual material, and a linking of these conclusions with an analysis of the discourse. The discourse analysis makes it possible to examine the texts according to the multiplicity of linguistic forms of expression and meanings caused by the fact that language has two functions: creating images and mediating interpersonality.¹ The chosen texts were published between 1917 and 1928, and were taken from various publications dealing with culture and literature: the yearbook

¹ See e.g. T. A. van Dijk, *Discourse as Interaction in Society. – Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. Vol. 2. Ed. T. A. van Dijk. London: Sage, 1997, pp. 1–37.

of the Estonian Literary Society, the album of the literary group *Siuru*; the magazines *Tarapita*, *Looming*, *Lilulii* and *Agu*; the almanac of the Group of Estonian Artists, and *The Book of New Art*. The selection is inevitably subjective, but offers interesting comparative material regarding the changes and how those writing about art formulated their ideas and understandings. I based my selection on two aspects. First, the text had to deal with topical issues of its time generally, both in more 'theoretical' writing and in art criticism. Secondly, the text had to reflect abstract art and, more specifically, cubism and constructivism. Two of the chosen examples of criticism give an overview of the exhibitions of the Group², and one examines the new poetry of Johannes Vares-Barbarus.³ The chosen criticism shows art analysis that veers towards formalism, and introduces the main principles and ideas as the 'existing' vocabulary that were used by the Group for characterising cubism/constructivism and then were used to describe the work of the Group itself. Thus, in connection with the Group's exhibition, the critics discuss form, purity and mind-focused art, and conclude that, despite the lack of recognisable objects and pretty pictures, the work of the Group was significant in the context of the general development of art.

The texts by Hanno Kompus, *Estonian Figurative Art 1916*⁴, and by Johannes Semper, *Artist A. Vabbe*⁵, are essential in the context of the current research in terms of

interpreting and explaining contemporary art; additionally, they are critical as comparative material regarding survival, usage and change in relation to texts by Jaan Vahtra⁶ and Märt Laarman⁷. Jaan Pert's article⁸ was chosen as an example of art writing which tries to summarise the development history of modern art. In addition, a considerable part of the text pays attention to cubism. Barbarus, in his collection of poetry *Geometrical Man*⁹, was a connecting link between figurative art and literature, formulating the aspirations of new art more generally, and realising form innovation in poetry on the basis of the main principles of cubism.

The key concepts on which the analysis rests are the following: development of art; defining art and the artist generally; art of beauty/beauty in art, including (aesthetic) experience of art; Paul Cézanne; and the material of art and its relationship with reality.

Besides external impacts, the founding of the Group was strongly influenced by the local cultural field in general, where writers dominated. Literary groups carried and formulated innovative moods, and embraced artists and art phenomena that seemed 'problematic' in the eyes of the wider public. Cultural manifestos (Young-Estonia and *Tarapita*) also formulated the 'rules of the game' for applied art. Art criticism produced by the writers shaped and mediated more general ideas and understandings. By the early 1920s, local art

2 J. Gens, Esimene Balti riikide vaheline kubistide näitus. – *Looming* 1924, no. 1, pp. 61–64, and Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühma kunstinäitus Tartus. (Pallas, 11–26 January 1925) – *Agu* 1925, no. 3, p. 70.

3 N. Andresen, Johannes Barbaruse 'Geomeetiline inimene'. – *Looming* 1925, no. 8, pp. 665–670.

4 J. Kompus, Eesti kujutav kunst 1916. – Eesti Kirjanduse Seltsi aastaraamat IX (1916). Tartu, 1917, pp. 125–154.

5 J. Semper, Kunstnik A. Vabbe puhul. – *Siuru* II. Tartu: Odamees, 1918, pp. 111–115.

6 Eesti Kunstnikkude Rühma kevädinäitus. – *Lilulii* 1924, no. 1, pp. 24–26, and J. Vahtra, Kaunidusmõisted kujutavas kunstis. – *Lilulii* 1924, no. 2, pp. 39–45.

7 M. Laarman, Uuest kunstist. – *Uue Kunsti Raamat*. Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhma almanak. Ed. M. Laarman. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstnikkude Ryhma Kirjastus, 1928, lk 3–8.

8 J. Pert, Modern kunsti arengu pääjooned. I and II. – *Agu* 1925, no. 1, pp. 22–25; no. 2, pp. 41–44.

9 J. Barbarus, Geomeetiline inimene. Tallinn: J. & A. Paalman, 1924.

possessed a relevant set of terms that had been suggested and introduced by earlier writers. The novelty and innovations that characterise the Group's principles in art had been in the air before the Group was founded, and therefore the favourable 'soil for thought' for something new was there. Local art ideas were moving towards increasingly abstract art, which can be seen as one encouraging factor for establishing the Group. The Group itself and the aspirations of their new art cannot be regarded separately from the local cultural area of the time, where a desire for radical changes and a wish to continue to be in opposition were typical, for example, of the Tarapita members.

James Paul Gee calls a debate in society Conversation¹⁰. This includes an exchange of ideas or a discussion between both specific and wider social groups, which a large part of the population knows and takes 'sides' on.¹¹ Some of the topical discussions are followed by the majority of the population, whereas others remain within a narrow social group, concerning only its own members (e.g. debates in the academic sphere).¹² It can thus be said that each subsequent writing that has a say in a given debate is connected with earlier writings and uses the vocabulary and ideas 'established' by them. Analysing published art writing and relying on Gee's term Conversation, we can speculate on the idea that the art-theoretical discussions and criticism published in

the press are part of (simultaneously continuing and developing) the ongoing Conversation about the 'idea', 'meaning' and aims of figurative art; they additionally have a significant role in 'educating' the audience for art. Despite different dates of publication, all the tackled texts generally share similar views or problems. Themes, issues and ideas connected with making and perceiving art circulate, recur and vary in different texts that deal with art creation and art ideas, thus shaping the foundations of writing about art, as well as looking at art.

The writings focus on the history of art development, its cyclic essence, the alternation of naturalist *versus* abstract periods and references to the patterns of development. Purity as one of the central keywords of modernist art occurs in all the analysed texts; there is a marked shift from art based on pure experience towards that based on pure form. Significantly, what, for example, Kompus and Semper considered pure art (art for art's sake), differed from the pure art of the Group. The latter probably aspired towards freedom from narrative content. Making and 'tasting' art as a process is described in several texts through keywords typical of Gestalt psychology. The texts refer to the contact points of psychic structures of people living at the same time, and discuss organised imagery in creating fictitious space. On the one hand, the 'thing' is regarded as a bridge between the artist and the viewer¹³, while, on the other hand, the aim of art is reformulated and the depicted 'thing' is replaced by the painting itself as a 'thing'¹⁴. Writing about modern art, Cézanne's importance is emphasised in understanding contemporary art, referring

10 Gee uses the term *C(c)onversation* both with a capital and a small letter, thus distinguishing 'small' (in its everyday meaning) and 'big' public discussions. To maintain this difference, I also use Conversation, indicating bigger public discussions.

11 E.g. such a Conversation might tackle the topic of the health hazards of smoking. – J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. London, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 35.

12 J. P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, p. 49.

13 E.g. J. Semper, *Kunstnik A. Vabbe puhul*, pp. 111–115.

14 M. Laarman, *Uuest kunstist*, p. 7.

to the development of art – in principle, everything modern is associated with Cézanne's work or has grown out of and developed from his creative principles. His name is also used as a positive model, an example, through which the writer adds weight and validity to his ideas or work, thus substantiating the 'correctness' of the artworks. All examined texts present an idea of art that does not imitate, copy or emulate nature in its traditional sense; instead, the artist uses the visible world as material that he mediates via his experience, adds his own vision to or simply expresses general patterns of. The aspiration for realism was essentially redefined (interpreted) as an idea of art which is more real than life itself, because it can embrace what is unattainable to the senses and see the invisible behind the visible.

The shift is evident in art writing itself – from focusing on an artwork or an artist, the writing moves towards more abstract 'theoretical' discussion. It is traditionally believed that theory is transparently able to explain any work of art; it is enough to know how to use the theory. According to Daniel Hertz, theories used by artists and critics can be regarded as games, linguistic games, which are played with words about art's objects.¹⁵ Vahtra and Laarman, as writing artists, 'theorised' and manifested the work of the Group. This was an essentially new aspect in art writing of the time, because self-explanation, and justification of the chosen trend and manifesto had been previously unknown in art life.¹⁶ Trust in the artists' word, and faith in the rightness of the 'theory',

seemed to be confirmed by the fact that art criticism accepted, without much critical analysis, the set of terms offered by the artists, on which basis Vahtra characterised cubism. The work of the Group was described and observed according to the 'conditions' prescribed by the Group itself. It could be claimed there that a work of art became a work of art because of the theory behind it. Thus the keywords form, surface, purity and others occur in a 'cubist meaning'. Similarly, only from the point of view of figurative art, Andresen examined Barbarus's *Geometrical Man*.

In summary, the occurrence, usage and change of ideas and understandings found and compared in the chosen texts reveal diverse interpretations of the 'new art' in local art writing. In addition, several 'new' art phenomena and views mixed and blended at the level of ideas.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
proof-read by Richard Adang*

15 D. Hertz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authority of the Avant-Garde*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 4.

16 V. Sarapik, *Keel ja kunst. oxymora 3*. Tallinn: Uneri ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 1999, p. 248.