

# **Soviet Modernity? The Ideology of Contemporaneity in Estonian Art of the Thaw Period**

## **Paper Proposal**

### **Soviet Colonialism in the Baltic States. Special Issue of the *Journal of Baltic Studies***

Liisa Kaljula  
Raua 24-44  
10152 Tallinn  
Estonia  
[liisa.kaljula@ekm.ee](mailto:liisa.kaljula@ekm.ee)

Modernity, once a glorious concept of European Enlightenment, has become one of the main critical terms of global postcolonial studies of today. Still little has been said about different modernities at work in different non-Western contexts,<sup>1</sup> like the modernity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet Union, vast territory subjected to the modernization of a specific kind for three quarters of a century. Frankfurt School that conducted one of the most systematic studies of modernity in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had concentrated on the critique of capitalist society and made modernity therefore synonymous with nation state and free market economy. Historian David L. Hoffmann, editor of the first compendium on Russian Modernity, has though reminded that Soviet socialism was too a product of European Enlightenment, and many aspects in Soviet socialism paralleled with the developments throughout Europe at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century: rise of bureaucracy and state control, attempts to manage the population, scientism with a will to rationalize and categorize society, belief in progress and a wish to leave religion and tradition behind, and the rise of mass politics.<sup>2</sup>

While Stalinist interlude had called upon eclectic historicism in culture – „the best that could be found from the past“ – then the era of Thaw, for a complex of reasons, greeted restoration of contacts with modernism. In recent Cold War study there seems to be consensus in two: That the great powers were contesting for modernity in this lasting rivalry and that the war fronts were written in the culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain. One of the results of Nikita Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 and the all-embracing de-Stalinization campaign that followed in the Soviet Union was the ideology of contemporaneity that also made its way to the visual arts. Manifesting itself in the so called „Severe style“, it marked the main artistic innovation and breakthrough from academic Socialist Realism in central Moscow as well as in peripheric Riga and Tallinn art scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> Sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt has suggested the term „multiple modernities“ for the study of modernity in the non-Western societies – Eisenstadt, Shmuel (2000). *Multiple Modernities* - Daedalus, Winter.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann, David L (2000). *European Modernity and Soviet Socialism – Russian Modernity*. London: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 245-246, 255-257.

In Tallinn the new ideology gave exemplary works at the end of 1950s and beginning of 1960s with the compulsory attributes of the scientific-technical revolution presented with youthful energy: rushing jet planes, heavy excavators and clever looking electric guitars. It is quite natural that the young generation of artists grown up in the Soviet Union during the harsh Stalinist years and entered the art scene in the promising late fifties took hold of the contemporaneity claim. According to Russian art historian Yuri Gertchuk art made in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death can not be fully comprehended without the naïveté of the Thaw – not to mention that contemporaneity has always been the claim of the youth – but in addition to the subject matter it allowed to update the form and return to artistic tasks banned during the Stalinist years. In the shadow of the officially approved subject matter contacts could be restored with Western traditions cut off during the intermediate years – pre-war expressionism, cubism and futurism – but also with severe looking national-romantic modernism of Kristjan Raud.

So is it Soviet, Western, or local modernity that prevails young art made in Tallinn during the peak of the Thaw? Or should we accept the idea implied by Homi K. Bhabha that culture produced in the colonial situation is destined to be hybrid in form and ambivalent in content? David Chioni Moore has ascribed longing for the authentic mythic origin or the lost Westernness compensatory behaviour of the colonial subject.<sup>3</sup> In the Severe style practiced in Tallinn modernism does appear in a curiously hybrid manner where the officially approved aesthetics seek formally related aesthetics from the culture that one wished to be part of, making it look “almost the same, but not quite”. In this paper I will look at the complex ideological framework behind modernist realist art made in Soviet Estonia during the Thaw period and try to map hybrid cultural patterns found in one of the Western border states of the Soviet Union.

*Liisa Kaljula is a scholar who combines Art History and Cultural Studies in her research. Focusing on the Estonian and Central Eastern European art of the 20th century, her special interest lies in Modernization Studies and Postcolonial Studies` emerging branch Postsoviet Studies. She defended her MA thesis „Severe Style in Tallinn“ at Tallinn University Cultural Theory Department under the supervision of Dr. Boris Bernstein and Dr. Marek Tamm and is currently working on her PhD thesis entitled „Paradoxes of Modernization. 20th Century Estonian Art History Revisited“ at Tallinn University Studies of Cultures doctoral programme under the supervision of Dr. Tiina Kirss.*

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<sup>3</sup> Moore, David Chioni (2001). Kas post- koloniaalses on post- postsovetlikus? Globaalse postkoloniaalse kriitika poole. - Methis, vol. 5, no. 7, pp. 210.