

Jaak Kangilaski

AN INTERIM SUMMARY
OF A VAST AND ON-GOING WORK

Sirje Helme has been a leading figure on the Estonian art scene for several decades. She started as an art critic who responded with sensitivity to innovations in art and followed and supported the work of her contemporaries and the younger artists at the time. As the editor of the art almanac *Kunst*, and later as the director of an art publishing house, Sirje Helme's attention expanded to encompass the entire history of Estonian art and its international ties. After Estonia regained its independence, Sirje Helme became the director of the Center for Contemporary Arts Estonia and in this role she helped to manage the popularisation of Estonian art in the Western world and enthusiastically promoted the introduction of the contemporary international art in Estonia by curating several exhibitions here and abroad. She also organised international conferences and seminars, where she was often among the main speakers. From 2005 to 2009, Sirje Helme was the director of the Kumu Art Museum, and from 2009, the director-general of the Art Museum of Estonia.

From the beginning, Sirje Helme's art criticism skilfully linked the approaches to the bodies of work of individual artists and individual works to topical art theory issues, as well as drawing comparisons of Estonian art history to international developments. The history of Estonian art during the Soviet era, especially in the post-Stalinist period, has been one of Sirje Helme's main topics of interest. Her doctoral thesis, which she defended successfully at the Estonian Academy of Art



Fig. 1. Sirje Helme. Photo Eva Ligi, Delfi

this past January, is comprised of a lengthy introduction, four important articles by Helme (“Unofficial Art. Ways of Resistance in Estonian Post-War Art”, “Different Modernisms, Different Avant-gardes” “Why we Call it Avant-Garde”) and an article from a book on Estonian Pop Art – all of which analyse and explain Estonian art in the years between 1955 and 1975. Although the articles included in the dissertation were published starting in 2000 with intervals of several years, two topics link them all together – firstly, the nature of Modernism and the way it is expressed in post-war Estonian art, and secondly, how the concept of the avant-garde has been used to characterise Estonian art during the period under observation. Modernism and the avant-garde are concepts that have long histories and are very well-known internationally, although different art historians attribute different meanings to them. During the last few decades, great differences have become apparent, partially because competing art theories employ different definitions. And therefore, the collapse of the Socialist camp revealed how different the developmental factors and context, which impacted the art in these countries, was from the situation in the Western world.



Fig. 2. Ando Keskküla. Hanger. 1969. Oil, enamel, assamblage. Destroyed

Sirje Helme observes and compares how various theoreticians use these concepts. But she also maintains that a unique art world was created by the political conditions in Eastern Europe, and therefore, it should be recognised that great differences exist locally in the Modernist discourse and a definition of the avant-garde that differs from the one in Western art history is valid in Eastern Europe. (Yet, it would also be wrong to treat Eastern Europe as a homogeneous area and Western art also includes different developmental trends). Sirje Helme rightfully criticises attempts to present Western art history as the “primary pattern” and universal criterion, as well as the statements (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh *et al.*) about the cross-cultural nature of art. Sirje Helme finds methodological support for her approach to Estonian art in the concept of “various Modernisms” developed by American art historian Steven Mansbach, and his idea that, under Communist oppression, Modernism was associated with ethnic self-defence. Further support for her views comes from the German art historian Hans Belting’s idea of “two voices” in art history, and his concept that Eastern Europe lacked a critical relationship with Western Modernism and references to the latter were

rather symbolic of opposition to state policies. Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski's ideas about "horizontal art history" and transnationalism, which do not equalise but rather equated various art history narratives are also closely related to Sirje Helme's views. Similar support can also probably be found in post-colonialist art theory.

In her approach to Estonian art, Sirje Helme makes use of new concepts, as well as augments the meaning of other concepts. The expression "defence mechanisms of Estonian art" is defined as "mental attitudes and art techniques that helped to create an image for local art that differentiates it from the art of the Soviet Union." Sirje Helme believes that the ideological basis for these defence mechanisms is the "wish to be a real European." Helme makes a convincing case for this wish in the post-war period, but it may be too categorical to say that in the pre-war period "...belonging to Europe was not questioned" because the ideas contrasting Finno-Ugrians with Indo-Europeans also achieved a certain degree of popularity (Uku Masing, Oskar Loorits).

One of the most successful new concepts introduced by Sirje Helme is "Modernist Realism". This is used to define the "mixed realism" that was comprised of a juxtaposition and a partial mixture of the revived moderate Modernism of the pre-war era – the colour culture and picturesque nature of the Pallas School – and the influences of the Soviet "contemporary", the rhetoric of the space cult, as well as the so-called "Severe Style" that was popular throughout the Soviet Union. This mixed realism was contrasted with the Socialist Realism of the Stalinist period – the only permissible style at the time.

The concept of the avant-garde in art is defined by Sirje Helme in connection with its local social and ideological limits: "The concept of the avant-garde concept can be used when art emerges from a framework of security (crosses boundaries), and thereby, contrasts itself with the prescribed means of cultural participation." Based thereon, she is right to say that, in Estonian art history, both abstract art and Pop Art were avant-garde, "considering their serious opposition to the cultural policy established by the state, which expanded to become opposition to the entire political situation." Therefore, the avant-garde in the Soviet period was mainly political, and it is not important what forms were used and what aesthetic changes occurred in this avant-garde. Sirje Helme justifiably recognises the fact that abstract art in the late 1950s was more radical in the artistic context than Pop Art in the late 1960s, but thinks

that Pop Art was able to exert greater influence on subsequent developments, not only in the fine arts, but also in interior design, fashion, films, etc. It should be stressed that Pop Art had a liberating effect on the entire youth culture, while abstract art continued to be prohibited everywhere in the Soviet Union almost until the collapse of the system. Moscow's conservative theoreticians and party leaders considered abstract art to be its most dangerous artistic and ideological adversary and Pop Art was at least not abstract.

Sirje Helme agrees with the position that the criticism of Modernism and the neo-avant-garde aesthetic that got its start in the West in the 1960s was only partly accessible in Estonia, and it was alienating and even unsuitable. For instance, according to Hal Foster the radicalisation of the avant-garde meant disputing the importance of the principle of artistic autonomy and the artist's subjective self-expression. However, in Estonia "artistic autonomy not only defined an independence from the abnormalities of art (the doctrine of Socialist Realism), but also the individual's ideological independence." Therefore, it was natural that many Estonia artists remained loyal to the principles of artistic autonomy and other tenets of the Modernist aesthetic until the end of the Soviet era. This is also the reason why "after departing the field of Modernist aesthetics, many techniques characteristic of the Modernist aesthetic were subsequently adopted by the avant-garde, whereas the content could be totally removed from the work's formal means of presentation (Jüri Okas's paintings based on photos; Andres Tolt's painting)."

Sirje Helme's thesis can be viewed as a needlessly delayed by-product of her vast work. However, the thesis is important and a summary of a significant part of Sirje Helme's research to date. With her thesis, she has boldly participated not only in domestic discussions but also in international ones. The discussions will surely continue, but the analyses, propositions and arguments of Sirje Helme's thesis are so weighty that they demand to be taken into consideration by everyone that deals with the history of Estonian art during the Soviet period or is interested in it. The positions in the thesis are a part of Sirje Helme's contribution to the sixth volume of the *History of Estonian Art*, which was published this year.

JAAK KANGILASKI: *AN INTERIM SUMMARY OF A MAJOR AND ON-GOING WORK*

KEYWORDS: SIRJE HELME, ART IN THE SOVIET PERIOD, ESTONIAN AVANT-GARDE, ART IN EASTERN EUROPE, ART THEORY

SUMMARY:

Sirje Helme has been a leading figure on the Estonian art historical scene for several decades. From the beginning, her art criticism skilfully linked the approaches to the bodies of work of individual artists and individual works to topical art theory issues, and the comparison of Estonian art history to international developments. The history of Estonian art during the Soviet era, especially in the post-Stalinist period, has been one of Helme's main topics of interest. She also dealt with this in her doctoral thesis, which she successfully defended at the Estonian Academy of Arts this January. Although the articles that included in the dissertation were published starting in 2000 with intervals of several years, two topics link them all together – firstly, the nature of Modernism and the way it is expressed in post-war Estonian art, and secondly, how the concept of the avant-garde has been used to characterise Estonian art during the period under observation. Helme maintains that a unique art world was created by the political conditions in Eastern Europe, and therefore, it should be recognised that great differences exist locally in the Modernist discourse and a definition of the avant-garde that differs from the one in Western art history is valid in Eastern Europe. The discussions will surely continue, but the analyses, propositions and arguments of Sirje Helme's thesis are so weighty that they demand to be taken into consideration by everyone that deals with the history of Estonian art during the Soviet period.

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Jaak Kangilaski is professor emeritus of art history of Tartu University. His field of research covers Western 20th century theories of art as well as Estonian history of art during the Soviet period. Aside from his work of teaching and research Jaak Kangilaski has held influential posts such as rector of Estonian Academy of Arts 1989–1995 and prorector of University of Tartu 2003–2006.