

*Tõnis Tatar*

**DEPICTION OF LENIN AND STALIN  
IN ESTONIAN ART AS AN INDICATOR  
OF SHIFTS IN THE SOVIET  
AUTHORITATIVE DISCOURSE**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Estonia's independence, it has become commonplace to emphasize that at least during the latter stages of Soviet occupation most Estonian artists (or at least those with worthwhile artistic legacy) worked in relative autonomy from the Soviet official ideological and artistic discourses. Jaak Kangilaski has influentially argued that three competing discourses existed in Estonian art throughout the Soviet period. These were the discourse of the Soviet ideology and regime, the discourse of the avant-garde, and the nationalist-conservative discourse. The majority of the figures active on the artistic scene inhabited a grey area between the discourses, so that each fraction was able to interpret their output in a manner that suited their particular objects and ideals. During the first half of the Soviet period (until the end of the 1960s) the nationalist-conservative fraction and the avant-garde minded fraction formed an alliance against the Soviet power minded discourse, forcing the latter to retreat. As a consequence, a relatively moderate, even bourgeois model of autonomous apolitical art came to dominate Estonian art from the end of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2020.19.02>

<sup>1</sup> Jaak Kangilaski, 'Paradigma muutus 1970. aastate Lääne kunstis ja selle kajastus Eesti kunstielus', *Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2000), 221–225.

According to Kangilaski, the discourse of the Soviet regime may shortly be described as a mixture of Russian imperialism and communist ideology. The late Soviet period witnessed the weakening of the belief in the communist utopia, and from the late 1960s even the Communist Party and government hardly believed in it.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the last decades of the occupation saw Russian imperialism laid relatively bare – this resulted in the Russification campaign that restarted in Estonia during the Brezhnev era.

For political as well as artistic reasons, the legacy of the Soviet minded official discourse in Estonian art has been largely ignored, discarded, and intentionally forgotten. Among Estonian art historians there is a consensus of condemnation concerning the Soviet minded works of art that are perceived as manifestations of collaboration that were motivated by either fear, self-profit, or naivety. Even almost 30 years into Estonian independence this still remains a sensitive topic. In the context of the ambivalent (to put it mildly) regard that contemporary Russia has taken to the Soviet past, it is important to be clear in one's abdication of the Soviet regime and its ideological manifestations, which include art. Yet, to condemn the inhuman Soviet regime and its unlawful occupation of Estonia does not and should not mean that it cannot be neutrally studied and analysed in all its facets.

In this article I hope to offer a fresh, more nuanced, and diachronic interpretation of the discourse of Soviet power in Estonian art during the Soviet period. For this purpose, a very specific genre of Soviet art will be analysed, namely portraits of Lenin and Stalin. It must be said that the utter ideologization of the topic makes it both fascinating and difficult to study. It appears that there has never been a good time for an objective study of this subject. During the Soviet period it was not possible to publicly express any outlook on Soviet leaders other than enthusiastic admiration. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is difficult for a decent person not to condemn those figures for their outrageous crimes; therefore glorifications of these leaders – even in the form of art – are perceived as embarrassing, to say the least. Yet, it must be recognised that, for almost half a century, decisions to depict Lenin and Stalin, and the success or failure of these endeavours, often constituted crucial moments in artists' lives and careers. This was the

<sup>2</sup> Jaak Kangilaski, 'Paradigma muutus 1970. aastate Lääne kunstis ja selle kajastus Eesti kunstielus', 221.

most official, most responsible, most scrutinized and ambitious task a Soviet artist could possibly undertake. But under the circumstances of occupation it was also the most morally dubious and controversial one for Estonian artists. For a long period of time the question of whether and how to portray Lenin and Stalin was of vital importance, and for this reason a lot of thought was invested in it. Therefore, leaving aside our moral judgements, these works of art constitute objects that are interesting documents of the era, and should be analysed.

### THEORETICAL BASIS

In order to analyse these works of art as symptoms of their culture, this article draws upon theoretical analysis by Alexei Yurchak and Boris Groys. An attempt will be made to test the theoretical constructions on the empirical material of Estonian art depicting Lenin and Stalin (in order to delimit the subject, monuments will not be considered in this paper). It will be kept in mind that the position of the Soviet regime and its ideological manifestations in the Baltic states were different from Russia or some other Soviet republics. The main difference was that the Baltic states were incorporated (occupied and annexed) into the Soviet Union by means of external aggression. They also remained part of the Soviet Union for a shorter period than most of the other republics. This allowed the generally Western-oriented cultural identity as well as the memory of the pre-occupation independence remain viable throughout the period.

The cult of Lenin occupied the central position in the structure of Soviet culture. In a decidedly atheist state such as the Soviet Union, this quasi-religious phenomenon with its sacral centrepiece lying in a glass coffin in Moscow's Red Square certainly deserves analysis. For example, in Boris Groys' somewhat cynical view, Lenin's body was displayed in the mausoleum as evidence of the fact that he had really and irrevocably died, and therefore his spirit or cause was available for incarnation in subsequent Soviet leaders ('the only appeal to him is through the heirs who now stand upon his tomb').<sup>3</sup>

According to Alexei Yurchak, the political role of Lenin's body was anything but obvious, far exceeding that of mere symbol of communist

<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67.

propaganda. Yurchak notes that during the last years of Lenin's life he was isolated and his voice effectively censored by the party leadership. But while the politburo was isolating the living Lenin from the political world, it was simultaneously canonizing Lenin's public image. At that time, from 1922 until Lenin's death in January 1924, most mythological images and institutions around Lenin's cult were created. A year prior to Lenin's death, and in spite of his protests, the party leadership introduced the term 'Leninism' into public circulation. In short, the substitution of Lenin with Leninism occurred through simultaneous canonization of the ideal and banishment of the man.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely this construction of Leninism that, according to Yurchak, had an enormous role in the legitimation and delegitimation of power until the end of the Soviet Union. Every Soviet leader (including Stalin) had to refer to Leninism for legitimacy. Here Yurchak arrives at the organization of the Leninist polity – the unique way in which the political power of that regime was organized. Sovereignty here was vested neither in the figure of the ruler (as in Nazi Germany) nor in the abstract populace (as in liberal democracies), but in the Party. The material form of the Party was the body of Lenin lying in the mausoleum. While established in the early 1920s (he died, was embalmed, put on display), both the doctrine of Leninism and the physical body of Lenin required constant manipulating, reinterpreting, resculpting and reconstructing throughout the existence of the Soviet Union, according to Yurchak.<sup>5</sup>

Stalin's status in the Soviet culture was very different from that of Lenin. While Lenin was canonized post factum and post-mortem, Stalin's position allowed him to oversee his own reflection in works of art. As is well known, when it comes to the arts in the Soviet Union, Stalin exercised stern personal control, often interfering in even small details of particular works of art and shaping the lives and careers of many artists. But what was Stalin's program for the arts? Stalin's directive to writers and artists was to 'write the truth'. Groys notes that this did not refer to external truth but the inner truth in the artist's heart, his love for and faith in Stalin. Therefore, in words of Groys, Stalinist culture

4 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 119–122.

5 *Ibidem*, 133–135, 146.

was immersed in a peculiar romanticism, a cult of love for its creator<sup>6</sup> – surely a tragic contradiction in an era of unprecedented mass terror.

Stalinist culture was interested above all in Stalin as the creator of this new utopian world. In a marked difference from the thinking of the avant-garde that regarded the present as a mere prelude to the future, Stalinist realism was based on the thesis that sacred history takes place here and now, and that the gods and demiurges (Stalin and his 'Iron Guard') are constantly at work with their world-transforming miracles.<sup>7</sup>

Yurchak argues that during his reign Joseph Stalin had played a unique role in the discursive system of Soviet state socialism. In this system it was Stalin and only Stalin who stood outside of the ideological discourse, holding sole authority to criticize it from an external position. After Stalin's death and subsequent delegitimation of his status by Nikita Khrushchev, a major reorganization of the discursive regime of state socialism occurred. With Stalin's death the unique position external to ideological (political, scientific, artistic) discourse ceased to exist, and therefore metadiscourse on ideology disappeared from public circulation. According to Yurchak, this led to a profound shift within Soviet culture, which he calls the performative shift. On the one hand, with the disappearance of the external editorial voice the ideological representation (documents, speeches, ritualized practices, slogans, posters, monuments, and urban visual propaganda) became increasingly normalized, ubiquitous, and standardized. On the other hand, this opened up spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings under the disguise of strictly formulaic ideological forms, rituals, and organizations. Such representations no longer had to be read literally to work as elements of hegemonic representation. According to Yurchak, the performative shift was the central principle through which authoritative discourse in late socialism operated. The normalized and fixed structures of this discourse became increasingly rigid and were replicated from one context to the next practically intact. The replication of these forms became an end in itself, and the constative meaning of these discursive forms became increasingly unimportant.<sup>8</sup>

6 Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 68–69.

7 *Ibidem*, 113–114.

8 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 13–14, 26.

It must be noted that according to Yurchak the performative shift occurred in the authoritative discourse. While certainly very closely intertwined, one would have to be careful to equate authoritative discourse with that of the arts, especially during the late Soviet period. Soviet Union was a totalitarian regime, meaning that all spheres of life were subjected to ideological control and censorship conducted by the state. Yet it must be admitted that this was more true in the Stalinist period and gradually less so during the late Soviet period when arts regained at least partial autonomy.

When applying the Yurchak model to the development of Estonian late Soviet art one encounters certain difficulties. Yurchak notes that during the post-Stalinist late socialist period the authoritative discourse became increasingly impersonal.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile in Estonian art, a process of depoliticization, de-Sovietization and restoration of a relative autonomy came about in the post-Stalin era. As opposed to the almost complete standardization, normalization and politicization of arts during the Stalin years, Estonian artists gradually regained the right to subjective expression and individual form. Therefore it seems quite clear that the Yurchak model does not apply to Estonian art of the late Soviet period as a whole. It is for this reason that in this paper I shall analyse changes in the most official, authoritative, rigid of genres of Soviet (Estonian) art, namely the depictions of Soviet leaders. It is precisely in this ideologically most rigidly controlled and official section of art where overlaps with Yurchak's theoretical constructions concerning the authoritative discourse may be found.

According to Yurchak, from the 1950s onwards the form and style of visual propaganda became increasingly standardized and centralized. The image of Lenin was an example of this development. In 1970, massive celebrations of Lenin's hundredth birthday were to take place around the country. During the preparations for the event, a circular was launched from the Central Committee in Moscow, stating that as very few people still remembered Lenin personally, artists should depict him 'more as a heroic symbol than a common man'. According to Yurchak, a new style of depicting Lenin emerged. Lenin was subsequently portrayed as younger, taller, more muscular, in a more fixed and repeatable style, in fewer contexts and poses, and with fixed elements of visual structure from one representation to the

9 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 49.

next. The new style became normalized, with the newly formalized images acquiring names in the artistic discourse: 'Our Ilich' (Lenin as a common person), 'Squinting Lenin' (a witty Lenin), 'Lenin with Children' (a domestic, kind Lenin), 'Lenin the Leader' (a superhuman Lenin), and 'Lenin in the Underground' (a revolutionary Lenin). There were also two variants of Lenin writing: 'Lenin in His Office' and 'Lenin in a Green Office' (on a tree stump). In order to minimize the idiosyncrasies of their personal style, artists stocked normalized images of Lenin as material to quote from.<sup>10</sup>

### LENINIANA/STALINIANA IN ESTONIAN ART

The figure of Lenin was a ubiquitous symbol in the realm of Soviet everyday life. Reproductions of canonical portraits of Lenin (e.g. a 1919 drawing by Nikolay Andreyev) emerged on the walls of Estonian government offices as soon as the war had ended. Throughout the Soviet period the figures of Lenin and Stalin were also depicted by many Estonian artists, in many styles and techniques, and presumably for different motivations. As Estonia was for the second time incorporated into the Soviet Union in late 1944, Stalin died in early 1953 and his personal cult was denounced by Khrushchev in 1956, Staliniana in Estonian art spanned a much shorter period than Leniniana. After his death, Stalin quickly transformed from a quasi-sacral icon into a taboo – no images of Stalin were produced by Estonian artists until the fall of the censorship in the late 1980s.

In Estonian art history, 1948–1955 marked the highpoint of Stalinism. After the relatively milder post-war years, the Stalinist reign of terror was now fully unleashed on Estonian society as well as artists. Estonian art of the 1930s had been dominated by the Paris school of late impressionism which was also the prevalent style in the leading art school of the time, the Pallas Art School in Tartu. From the late 1940s Soviet Stalinist regime went on an all-out attack on the local traditions of Estonian art with the objective of its total assimilation with the official culture of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Partly due to their impressionist background, most artists were ill-equipped to

10 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 55.

11 Jaak Kangilaski, 'Okupeeritud Eesti kunstiajaloo periodiseerimine', *Kunstist, Eestist ja eesti kunstist* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2000), 233.



FIG. 1. ELMAR KITS, EVALD OKAS, *ESTONIAN RED GUARD VISITING LENIN AND STALIN*, 1951–1952. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.



FIG. 2. ARTISTS EVALD OKAS AND ELMAR KITS WITH THEIR PAINTING *ESTONIAN RED GUARD VISITING LENIN AND STALIN*, 1950–1951. PHOTO: ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

pursue academic naturalism in the vein of Socialist Realism, which in its dry naturalism and propagandistic content was perceived as the very negation of aesthetics, creativity and beauty hitherto conceived by Estonian artists. As part of the centralized and ideologized art politics, state orders were given to artists that often included portraits of Estonian as well as Russian cultural and political figures: scholars, politicians, exemplary workers, and communist state leaders. As Stalinist repressions ravaged the ranks of Estonian artists, taking on depictions of Soviet leaders was mostly motivated by fear.

One of the first remarkable portrayals of Soviet leaders by Estonian artists was a grand-scale painting 'Estonian Red Guards in front of Lenin and Stalin' (1951–52, 3 x 2 meters) by **Evald Okas** (1915–2011) and **Elmar Kits** (1913–1972). The painting was first exhibited in Tallinn at an exhibition dedicated to 34th anniversary of the October Revolution in November 1951. It has been analysed by Triinu Soikmets who noticed that on the final painting the figures of Lenin and Stalin

have swapped places compared to an earlier version of the painting that has been preserved on a photograph.<sup>12</sup> Soon after the exhibition had opened, the painting by Kits and Okas was dismantled by critics of Russian background, Lukina and Bernstein, who rebuked its depiction of Joseph Stalin. While approving the depiction of Lenin as dynamic, lively and convincing, the critics assessed the figure of Stalin to have been rendered static, passive and inexpressive, thereby ruining the compositional and ideological completeness of the work. Lukina and Bernstein concluded that 'the painters need to seriously and thoughtfully rework the figure of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin'.<sup>13</sup> Another young critic with Russian background, Boris Enst, also criticized the depiction of Stalin for lacking energy and power. In his view the soldiers of the Red Guard were also not depicted to look active enough. Enst concludes mercilessly that 'literally the whole canvas needs to be painted over'.<sup>14</sup>

It is not known whether this critique was the reason for the changes made in the final draft of the painting. When comparing the final draft with the earlier version one can notice several differences. The figure of Stalin has been positioned behind the desk in the centre of the composition and his posture has been made to look more active. Also, a soldier on the left side of the painting and a sailor on the right side of the painting have been repainted to look more captivated by the words of the revolutionary leaders, rather than chatting on the phone or with fellow soldiers as in the earlier version.<sup>15</sup>

Yurchak notes that collective writing, mutual imitation and minimizing one's authorial voice were characteristic of the period, after the performative shift in authoritative discourse had taken place.<sup>16</sup> However, in Estonian art it was in the Stalinist years when the practice of collective painting was common because it allowed painters to even out their individual styles and share accountability. This practice perished as soon as the terror of Stalinism gave way to less dangerous times. Thus it seems that at this point the realities of

12 Triinu Soikmets, 'Oktoobrirevolutsiooni kujutamine eesti kunstis', *Postimees*, 03.11.2017.

13 Z. Lukina, Boris Bernštein, *Maalikunstnike aasta-aruanne*, 46 (412), 17.11.1951, 5.

14 Boris Enst, '1951. aasta kunstinäitus', *Eesti Naine*, 12 (1951), 10.

15 Soikmets, 'Oktoobrirevolutsiooni kujutamine eesti kunstis'.

16 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 49.

Estonian art history contradict Yurchak's theoretical construction. Furthermore, concerning collective authorship, the changes in Estonian official art went in the diametrically opposed direction compared to that described by Yurchak.

**Johannes Saal** (1911–1964) was perhaps the foremost Estonian expressionist painter of his time. In the beginning of the 1950s, the painter with serious mental health issues received orders to paint portraits of V. I. Lenin and J. V. Stalin. In his two surviving portraits of Stalin, Saal maintains a peaceful realistic manner. Considering Saal's expressionist background, it is quite predictable that his works were criticized for having been left 'unfinished'. More interestingly, he was also accused of putting too much human emotion into his portraits of the leaders. While unable to receive positive criticism (in fact his exhibited works were left without any attention for years), his portraits of Lenin and Stalin were nevertheless used to decorate some offices or propaganda centres.<sup>17</sup>

If Stalinist culture was defined by a simulation of love and gratitude for its creator then why did it discard Saal's sympathetic depiction of Stalin for being too humanly emotional? The obvious answer is that the sort of love required by the leader was of a specific kind, probably closer to the awe and fright one would experience in front of an almighty demiurge or an omnipotent oriental god than in front of a fellow human. Groys has pointed out this ambivalence of Stalin's mythologem. Compared to the infinitely good 'grandfather' Lenin and the infinitely evil Leon Trotsky, the figure of Stalin despite his undoubtable sanctity also displayed many demonic attributes. For example, he worked at night, when normal people are asleep, his prolonged silence was frightening, as was his unexpected interference in debates or everyday affairs. Thus he ensured to the full that he is both sincerely revered and held in awe.<sup>18</sup> Johannes Saal being a relatively new Soviet citizen, and having little interest in politics, was probably simply unaware of these intricacies of the Stalin myth and iconography.

The third example of portraying Soviet leaders during the Stalin years is a portrait sculpture of Lenin (1950) by **Johannes Hirv** (1900–1953). This work is remarkable because for at least the next two decades it

17 Mare Joonsalu, 'Johannes Saal and His Work', *Johannes Saal. Elu metamorfoosid. Kataloog [Johannes Saal. Metamorphoses of Life. Catalogue]*, ed. and comp. Tiiu Talvistu (Tartu: Tartu Kunstimuseum, 2006), 208.

18 Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 70.



FIG. 3. JOHANNES SAAL, *J. V. STALIN*, 1952. TARTU ART MUSEUM.

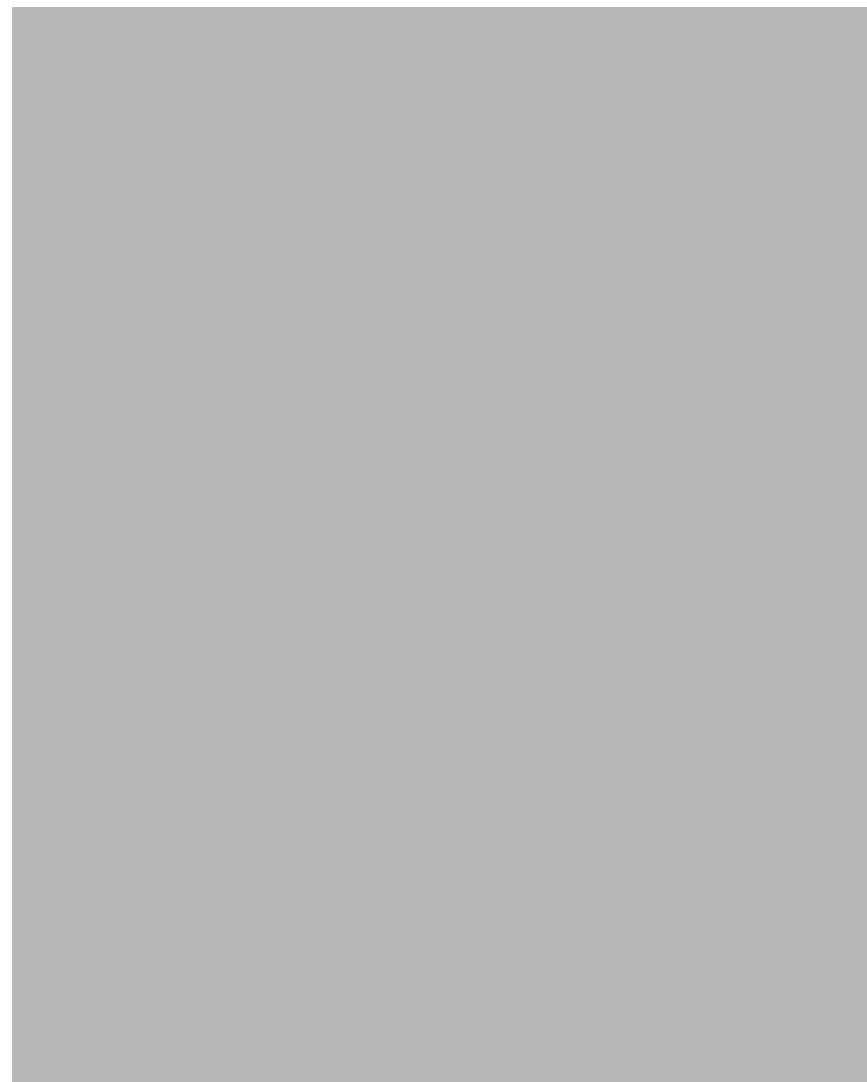


FIG. 4. JOHANNES HIRV, *V. I. LENIN*, 1950. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

was generally held to be the best depiction of the Soviet leader by an Estonian artist. To shed light on the critics' expectations for such works I shall quote an appraisal from a 1958 article by critic Leo Soonpää: 'In his portrait the artist has emphasized will of power, energy, and conviction that we can read from the posture of the head, from the penetrating gaze and from the treatment of the mouth. The sculptor conveys Lenin as particularly close to us by carving an ever-slight smirk in the corners of his lips. Thereby Hirv in this marble portrait bust has given us a synthesis of Lenin as a leader and as a man, which yields the work great richness and persuasiveness'.<sup>19</sup>

A decade of accelerating liberation in Estonian society, culture, and the arts ensued from the late 1950s to end of the 1960s. The art of the interwar period was rehabilitated, the formal language of visual arts regained considerable freedom, artists retrieved their right to work in individual styles and with apolitical subject matter. But also during this decade of quick positive changes, depictions of Lenin endured as a viable niche of official art.

The most prominent artist of the period who repeatedly depicted Lenin was **Evald Okas**. Okas has shed light on the background of his two graphic series of Lenin in a 1975 interview saying that artists are intrigued by Lenin 'as a revolutionary and state leader, as a philosopher and as someone close to us'. Okas says that his aim was to liberate himself from the photographic naturalism by internalizing the essence of Lenin – the type of his face, his movements and expressions. It is particularly interesting how Okas analyses the difference between his first series of Lenin from 1964 and second series from 1969: 'Against my will there was a certain amount of representativeness and pathos in the first series. This was undoubtedly influenced by the conventions of how Lenin is often depicted in works of art and films – always the tribune of the people, always the hero. In my second series from 1969 I tried to avoid representativeness, pathos as well as situational storytelling. In the focal point stood the face of Lenin. I tried to render different expressions, shades, and the dynamics of his face according to psychological states. I wanted to show Lenin as intimately as possible'.<sup>20</sup>

19 Leo Soonpää, 'Eesti NSV skulptuur', *Ars longa... Artikleid ja esseid* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1974), 43.

20 Martti Soosaar, *Kunstnik ja modell* (Tallinn: Kunst, 1978), 152–164.



FIG. 5. EVALD OKAS, ENGRAVING FROM THE SERIES V.I. LENIN, 1969. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

It is difficult to decide whether here the realities of Estonian art (at least as described by one of its representatives) comply with the theoretical constructions described above. Remember that according to Yurchak the post-Stalinist period witnessed a performative shift that also affected the depiction of Lenin that became normalized and standardized. On the one hand, Okas seems to respond to the Central Committee circular inciting artists to treat Lenin less as a historical figure (whom few living artists had witnessed in person) and concentrate on Lenin as a symbol. On the other hand, while Yurchak argues that depiction of Lenin changed towards a canonized, standardized repertoire, the words of Okas seem to indicate the exact opposite. While the 1964 series indeed concurs with Yurchak's



description of the post performative shift Lenins, Okas' approach in his 1969 series seems to be a direct reaction against these formalizing and normalizing tendencies.

On the occasion of Lenin's centennial in 1970, a number of depictions of the communist leader was commissioned from artists. One of the artistically more valuable works was produced by sculptor **August Vomm** (1906–1976). Vomm worked on the large portrait bust for three years saying that during that time all other works seemed secondary to him. 'If you want to bring out the temperament and personality, you have to keep your own temperament in check. /.../ I do not want to sound vain but I have never liked any of my portraits as much as I like this one,' said Vomm in a 1975/76 interview.<sup>21</sup> In a 1970 newspaper criticism Jaan Vares (sculptor and rector of the Tallinn Art Institute) compared Vomm's Lenin with Hirv's as the best Lenins in Estonian sculpture: 'While Hirv concentrated on the intellectual side and humanist core of the creator of the socialist country, Vomm carves a composite portrait of Lenin as a strong-minded revolutionary and thinker.'<sup>22</sup> The work was awarded as the best depiction of Lenin by Estonian Ministry of Culture as well as by the Artists' Union, and it was subsequently placed in the lobby of the building of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party in Tallinn.<sup>23</sup>

The portrait sculptures of Lenin by Hirv and Vomm afford us another chance to follow the changes in the authoritative discourse as expressed through the most official and canonical of genres of Estonian Soviet art. Comparing the two works (from 1950 and 1968–70 respectively), the marble sculpture by Hirv strikes one as more pompous and representative. Lenin is portrayed with a raised head and eyes fixed in the distance, his posture and facial expression are lively and energetic, he seems to be caught in a flurry of giving a speech. Whereas in Vomm's oaken version Lenin is shown sunk in thoughts, his glance seemingly turned inwards, his facial expression is that of concentration with even a tint of melancholy. Vomm's version is undoubtedly the more humane, intimate, and psychological, while Hirv's Lenin should inspire optimism and conviction. Therefore,

21 Soosaar, *Kunstnik ja modell*, 118.

22 Jaan Vares, 'Skulptuur juubelinäitusel', *Sirp ja Vasar*, *Sirp ja Vasar*, 06.02.1970.

23 Soosaar, *Kunstnik ja modell*, 119.

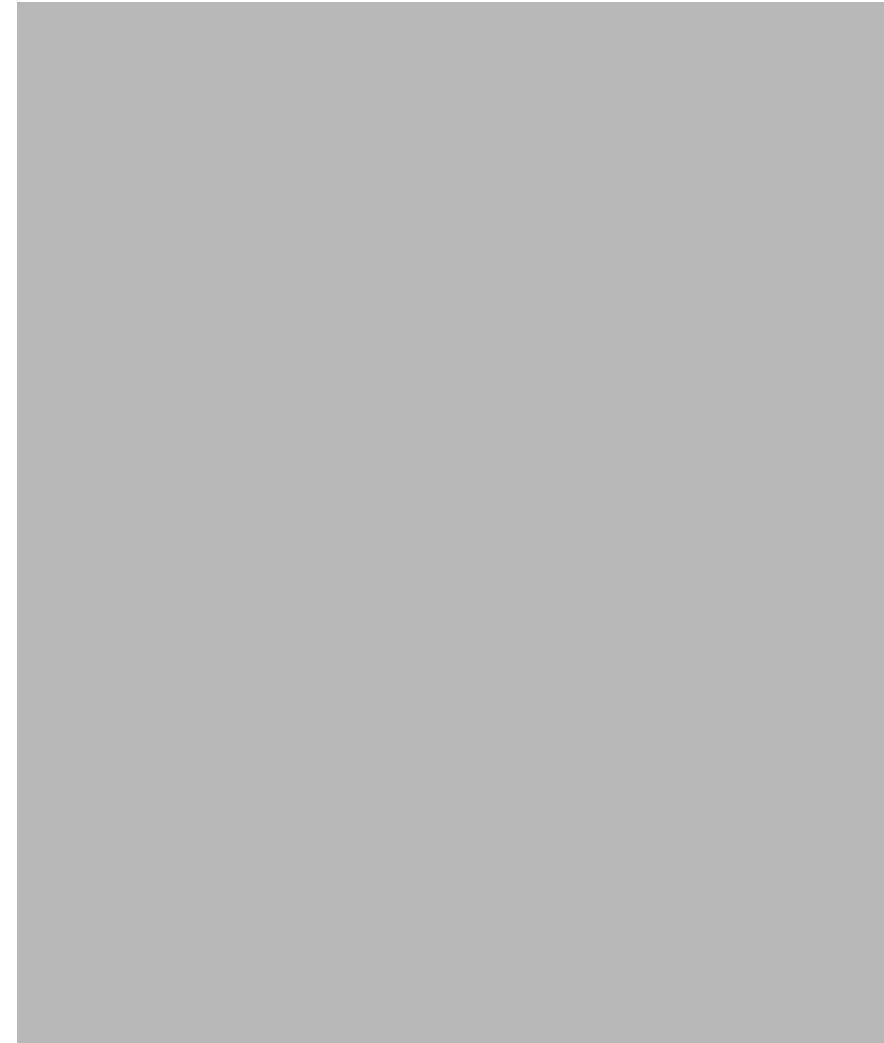


FIG. 6. AUGUST VOMM, V. I. LENIN, 1968–1970. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

this example also seems to contradict the theory of the performative shift rendering authoritative discourse and its visual representations entirely formulaic, standardized and normalized. Again, rather the opposite seems to be true in Estonian official art.

Yurchak also notes that after the performative shift, Lenin came to be depicted in a more fixed and repeatable style, with fewer painting

and sculpting techniques, materials, colours, and textures.<sup>24</sup> When we look at a number of depictions of Lenin from the second half of the 1960s onwards by Estonian artists, this claim seems quite doubtful. For one reason or another it was at this time that a number of more liberal-minded Estonian artists also took up the task. A remarkable example is a 1968–69 painting by **Ilmar Malin** (1924–1994) that depicts Lenin's head hovering above a red circle of sun, while on the lower part of the painting is a photcollaged jumble of tiny machines, factories, weapons, buildings, and people. In a 1999 interview, a close friend of Malin's, poet and literary scholar Ain Kaalep mentions this painting: 'Malin also has a portrait of Lenin. If one looks into it more carefully one sees that in the backdrop of the portrait is the horrific chaos that Lenin introduced to world history. This is by no means an ordinary official picture of Lenin and it would not have been accepted in Moscow'.<sup>25</sup> Neither Malin nor Kaalep had any reason to feel sympathy for Lenin. Both men fought with Finland against the Red Army and were later imprisoned (Malin spent years in Gulag). In similar vein, Efraim Allsalu and Elmar Kits in their respective 1967 and 1968 paintings depicted Lenin as a monument, perhaps ironically drawing attention to the pseudo-mythological status that the communist leader held in Soviet official culture.

In another 1969 painting **Elmar Kits** renders Lenin's figure as encircled by a number of tiny canonical scenes from Lenin's life that call to mind an orthodox iconostasis. Kits was a terrific late impressionist painter whose career had been hit hard by the Soviet occupation and Stalinist cultural politics. In his later career he turned to abstract expressionism, notably making waves with a legendary exhibition of abstract paintings in 1966. Kits was an independent and ironic character who surely had no reason to feel anything positive towards the creator of the communist state. But even if Kits painted this work with tongue-in-cheek irony, this evidently went unnoticed with the communist office-bearers as the painter was given a state award for the painting.<sup>26</sup> Around that time similar modernist and ambivalent depictions of Lenin were created by liberal-minded

24 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 55.

25 Margus Kasterpalu, 'Ilmar Malin – ilmas üksikõndinud sürrealist', *Postimees*, 20.01.1999.

26 Juta Kivimäe, 'Meie reliikvia oli Lenin', *Sirp*, 12.08.2005.

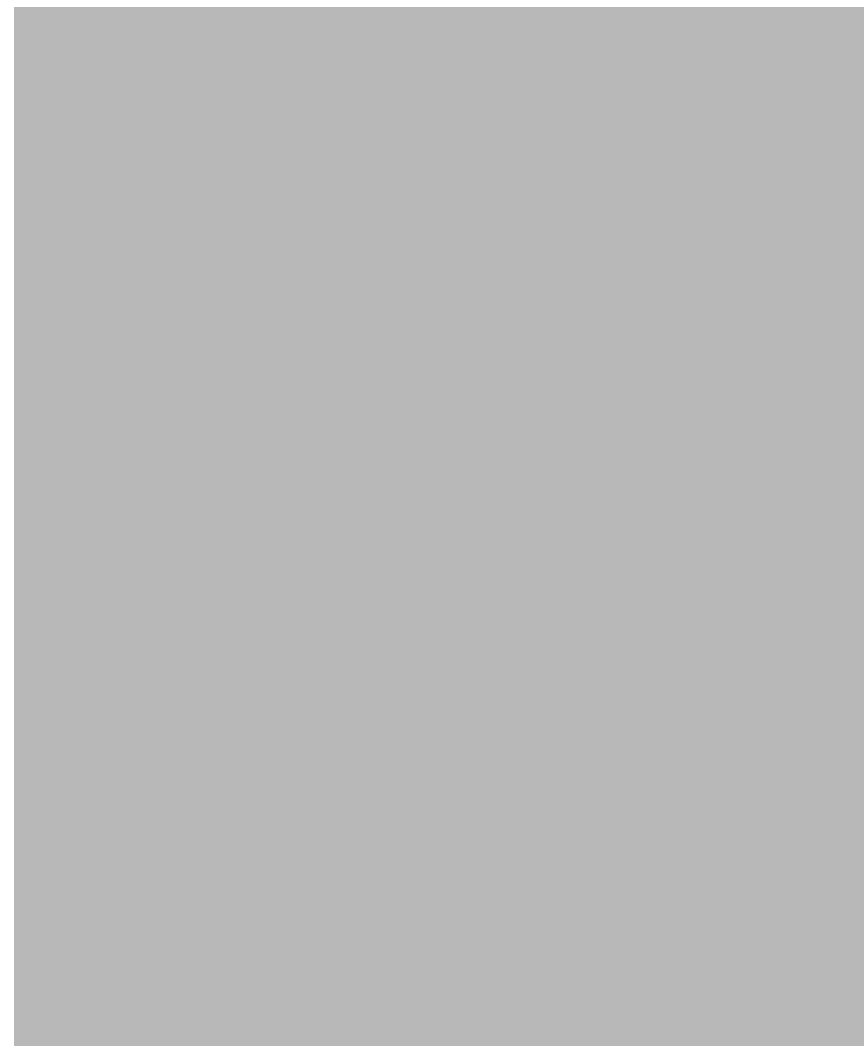


FIG. 7. ELMAR KITS, *LENIN*, 1969. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

artists such as Alo Hoidre, Ilmar Torn, Rinaldo Veeber. These artists too, far from retreating into a fixed technique and repeatable style, use the figure of Lenin as a starting point for their individual and idiosyncratic artistic endeavours. And at least in some cases hints and tints of irony and criticism are hidden in these depictions.

During the last two decades of the Soviet period portrayals of Lenin became rarer in Estonian art. A few remarkable depictions are clearly marked by cool irony, postmodernist play with quotations and conscious eclecticism. The first and foremost example of a postmodernist rendering of Lenin by an Estonian artist is a painting 'Lenin with a cat' (1972) by young painter **Rein Tammik** (b. 1947). The painting is based on a photograph of Lenin with a cat on his lap, but the otherwise realist looking depiction is supplemented by a chequered red and white tablecloth (a Tammik signature motif). The depiction of Lenin's face with swollen Asiatic eyes was also by no means flattering. The artist submitted the painting for the 1972 annual exhibition of Estonian art, but it was rejected. Critic and art historian Ants Juske writes: 'It was also the position of the author that was ambivalent – was this an attempt to do official art, or was it mockery? Either way, jury rejected the painting but the [KGB] informants also did not dare to report it. Allegedly Tammik was told that, all right, let us forget this incident'.<sup>27</sup>

Another example is a photorealistic relief print from 1977 by **Urmas Ploomipuu** (1942–1990). Tõnis Saadoja writes in his essay on Ploomipuu: 'A symbolic type of work in Ploomipuu's graphic art is the V. I. Lenin portrait (1977) (the fee for which the artist is said to have used to buy a car), because a huge number of Lenins were printed for distribution throughout the Soviet Union. Ploomipuu's Lenin seems to have been caught on the move – in the moment before, or after, an official photo was taken. Therefore, the picture has a very spontaneous quality; it seems documentary and contemporary, even carefree. Commenting on the result, Urmas [Ploomipuu] said that this was the only possible way to portray politics – with a kind of displacement, the keeping of a distance /.../'.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the need to keep distance was also a point that Evald Okas made when explaining his process of creating his second Lenin series (1969).<sup>29</sup> In Okas' case this meant distance from photos and canonical depictions of Lenin, and he achieved this by internalizing Lenin's image. In Ploomipuu's case the notion

27 Ants Juske, 'Rein Tammik – nõukogude postmodernist', *Tundeline teekond Velázquezest Navitrollani* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2012), 367.

28 Tõnis Saadoja, *Urmas Ploomipuu valge maja* [*Urmas Ploomipuu's White House*] (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuseum, 2011), 88–89.

29 Soosaar, *Kunstnik ja modell*, 151.

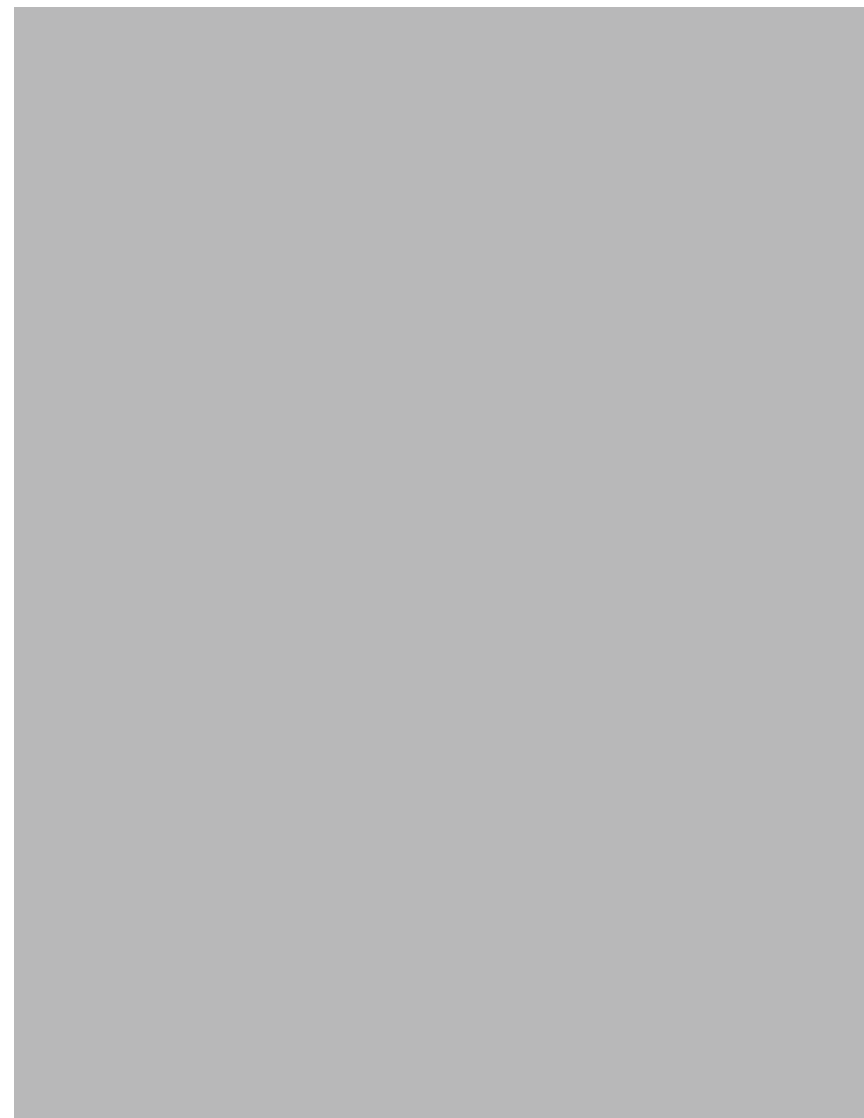


FIG. 8. URMAS PLOOMIPUU, *LENIN*, 1977. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

of distance has an opposite meaning – presumably the distance that he was pursuing was emotional, and he achieved it by the mechanical-seeming effect of the raster.



FIG. 9. ILMAR KRUSAMÄE, *RIDE*, 1977–1978. ART MUSEUM OF ESTONIA.

A less known example of Estonian Leniniana comes from a young hyperrealist painter of the time, **Ilmar Kruusamäe** (b. 1957). The 1977–78 painting ‘Ride’ is one of Kruusamäe’s first art works. It depicts an absurd vision of Lenin behind the wheel of a red Volkswagen Golf speeding on a highway. In the place of a Volkswagen badge on the front grill of the car is an emblem of the Tartu Car Repairs Factory; a tiny guardian angel may also be spotted hovering above the car. Kruusamäe first exhibited the painting on an exhibition of the Tartu University Art Cabinet in the University cafeteria. Depicting Lenin in such a manner was still considered sacrilege that might have had the artist expelled from the university. Therefore Kruusamäe was advised by older colleagues to retouch Lenin’s face. He restored the face immediately after the exhibition had concluded.

Kruusamäe’s Lenin was definitely on the other side of what was allowed even during the latter stages of the occupation. It is obvious that the painting does not carry feelings of admiration for ‘the greatest of all men’ that the official propaganda was still preaching day in, day out. So why did Kruusamäe decide to depict a scene that could have potentially caused him considerable problems? In fact, the thinking behind this painting (and of Tammik’s) is close to methods used by the representatives of the so-called Sots art that emerged in Moscow in the early 1970s. This movement used quotation, conscious eclecticism, and conflict of antagonistic semiotic and artistic systems, thus being very much in line with the general postmodernist aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s European and American art.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Kruusamäe’s painting is a provocative play with mutually exclusive symbolic objects.

The last phase of depictions of Soviet leaders by Estonian artists occurred in the final years of the empire, during perestroika and the Singing Revolution. This was the time when Soviet censorship lost its hold on Estonian art, thus allowing artists to express even the most anti-Soviet and dissident content. Interestingly, Stalin – not Lenin – was the figure to whom a few Estonian artists now turned. When in 1988 **Jüri Palm** (1937–2002) painted a portrait of Joseph Stalin, he had not been depicted by an Estonian artist for about 35 years, and the way Palm shows Stalin is diametrically different from that of the frightened artists of the dictator’s lifetime. In his painting ‘You, Stalin’ Palm turns to the same pictorial device that Elmar Kits had used in his 1969 portrait of Lenin, telling Stalin’s life in four stages – as a boy, as a young man, as a middle-aged, and an old man. Behind the images of younger Stalin there is a plate that seems to be dripping with blood, and in the backdrop of the old Stalin there are watchtowers of some Gulag prison camp. In a 1988 newspaper article, the novelist Olev Remsu analyses the painting: ‘What are we looking for in a portrait? Likeness, capturing of character. But we do not know what Stalin was like, what his character was like. All photos of him are staged and retouched, all stories about him distorted and deformed. We can only look at Jüri Palm’s conception of Stalin that has been expressed by means of posture, clothing, facial features,

30 Groy, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 10–11.



FIG. 10. JÜRI PALM, *YOU, STALIN*, 1988. TARTU ART MUSEUM.

and especially by his eyes. I believe that depicted here is a man's growing into a criminal, but a kind of criminal whom even the bishop of Canterbury described as a man of honour and as a gentlemen /.../. Palm is moderate and withheld in his hatred. /.../ Political art is the measure of freedom of every culture. We are only taking our first steps on this road.<sup>31</sup> A similarly grim and repulsive portrait of Stalin named 'Butcher' was painted in 1987–1988 by Miljard Kilk.

End of the 1980s marked the time when Stalinist crimes against Estonians were finally brought to the open (including the secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin Pact that designated Estonia to be occupied by the Soviet Union). In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev had announced the politics of glasnost, and according to Yurchak the 'Soviet authoritative discourse during perestroika was characterized by its obsession with disclosing the previously unknown facts of Soviet history'.<sup>32</sup> It is unclear why Yurchak uses a disparaging word such as 'obsession' to describe politics that for the first time in the 70-year history of the Soviet Union strived for a more or less honest and critical view of its past. Nevertheless, in light of his analysis – and even though these artists themselves would probably wholeheartedly protest – we may for the purpose of this article regard the portraits of Stalin by Palm and Kilk as the last utterances of the authoritative discourse (now in a phase of self-criticism) of Soviet Estonian painting on the subject of the quasi-mythological leaders.

## CONCLUSIONS

If the lack of nostalgia or mostly even lack of respect for the Soviet minded art produced by Estonian artists in the Soviet period is a sign of anything, it signals the complete failure of the Soviet ideological and artistic indoctrination. Yet, it would be a mistake, at least by art historians, to dismiss for moral and ideological reasons official imagery from academic scrutiny. An academic study does not mean justification or rehabilitation; in some instances it helps us reconstruct history in a more nuanced fashion.

31 Olev Remsu, 'Mõtisklusi Jüri Palmi maali „Jossif Stalin“ ees', *Sirp ja Vasar*, 20.05.1988.

32 Alexei Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review*, 70 (2) (2011), 319.

The main theoretical impulse for this paper stems from Alexei Yurchak, and it revolves around the concept of the performative shift of the Soviet authoritative discourse. According to Yurchak, the demise of the external censor (Joseph Stalin) entailed a major internal normalization of the authoritative discourse. As a result, the performative dimension of authoritative utterances grew more important, while the constative dimension opened up to new meanings.

While Yurchak does not specifically use examples from the arts to support his theory, in this paper I tested the theory on empirical material from Estonian art. Of course, even during the harshest Soviet time not all art could be associated with the Soviet authoritative discourse. Therefore, the most official sub-genre of official art, namely depictions of the Soviet leaders Lenin and Stalin, was chosen to be tested by the theory.

To that purpose a number of more outstanding examples of the Staliniana and Leniniana in Estonian art of the Soviet period were analysed. As a result, the following conclusions were made: (1) during the over 40-year period of Soviet occupation, conventions of depicting Lenin and Stalin underwent several notable changes that more or less reflected shifts in the Soviet politics as well as the developments in Estonian arts. The authoritative discourse in Estonian arts was by no means stable but experienced changes that were to some extent comparable to the changes in the avant-garde and national-conservative discourses of Estonian art. (2) The styles and approaches to artistic problems of depicting the leaders were not the only aspects that changed. In all likelihood, the artists' motivations to undertake the task also varied in different decades of the occupation. (3) The changes in the depiction of the leaders amounted to the fundamental meaning and message of these works of art. Especially from the end of the 1960s, an increasingly ironic undertone prevailed.

In relation to the theory of the performative shift in the authoritative discourse, it may be concluded that changes in the depictions of the Soviet leaders mostly do not concur with Yurchak's construction. According to Yurchak, collective writing, mutual imitation and minimizing of authorial voice were typical of the period after the performative shift had taken place; however, in the realm of official artistic imagery, these were the characteristics of the Stalinist period (alas, before the argued performative shift).

While according to Yurchak the performative shift prompted the depictions of Lenin to become normalized, standardized, and canonized, in the case of Evald Okas we saw that this was to a certain point true with respect to his 1964 graphic series of Lenin, but not true in the case of his 1969 series. Also, the examples of the two officially most heralded Estonian depictions of Lenin – those by Johannes Hirv (1950) and August Vomm (1968–70) – appear to contradict the theory of the performative shift that rendered the visual representations of authoritative discourse entirely formulaic, standardized and normalized. Again, rather the opposite seems to be true.

Yurchak argues that the performative shift opened up spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings under the disguise of strictly formulaic ideological forms. From the second half of the 1960s, depictions of Lenin were increasingly taken up by liberal artists influenced by modernist and, a few years later, postmodernist thinking. When considering the cases of Malin, Tammik, Ploomipuu or Kruusamäe, it is true that the image of Lenin was used creatively to produce indeterminacy and unanticipated meanings. But these artists definitely did not depict Lenin in strictly formulaic forms – in fact, quite the contrary was true.

Therefore, we may conclude that the official discourse in Estonian arts did not wholly conform to the shifts in the authoritative discourse as described by Yurchak. My suggestion is that the reason for this was that in Estonia from the 1960s onwards the official discourse in arts had lost its sources of legitimation and credibility (Stalinist reign of terror, any sincere belief anyone might have held in the communist utopia), and was forced to make compromises with the much more viable avant-garde minded and national-conservative discourses.

**TÕNIS TATAR: DEPICTION OF LENIN AND STALIN IN ESTONIAN ART AS AN INDICATOR OF SHIFTS IN THE SOVIET AUTHORITATIVE DISCOURSE**  
**KEYWORDS:** ESTONIAN ART; SOVIET ART; LENIN; STALIN; PERSONAL CULT; SOCIALIST REALISM; POSTMODERNISM

### SUMMARY

The paper provides an analysis of changes in depiction of Soviet leaders by Estonian artists during the period of Soviet occupation of Estonia. More specifically, changes in the iconography of Lenin and Stalin are viewed in light of Alexei Yurchak's concept of performative shift of the Soviet authoritative discourse.

During the over 40-year period of Soviet occupation conventions of depicting Lenin and Stalin underwent several notable changes that more or less reflected shifts in the Soviet politics as well as the developments in Estonian arts. The paper argues that changes in the depiction of the leaders amounted to the fundamental meaning and message of these works of art. Especially from the end of the 1960s, an increasingly playful and ironic undertone prevailed.

In using the depictions of the Soviet leaders in Estonian art to test the aforementioned theoretical constructions, the paper however concludes that changes in the official discourse in Estonian arts did not wholly conform to the performative shift as described by Yurchak.

### CV

**Tõnis Tatar**, PhD (b. 1980) is a lecturer in the Department of Art History at the University of Tartu. His main research topics are Estonian art history during the Soviet period, 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of art, and more recently neuroaesthetics. Previously he has worked at the Tartu Art Museum where he curated a number of exhibitions.