

Jüri Okas' 'specific objects':
Diverging Discourses in Estonian Art in the 1970s
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Susan Buck-Morss has analysed the 'dreamworld of modernity' and mass utopia that was shared by American capitalism and Soviet socialism, and pointed to the striking similarities in visual imagery of high and popular culture, mostly of the 1920s and 30s, on both sides. However, discussing these similarities together with her Russian colleagues, she encountered an irresolvable difficulty. "Looking at the same images, we did not see the same things"¹. Describing their experiences during the Cold War on respective sides, both seemed to speak the language of the other's former official discourse, the one that they had been opposed to. The Eastern side used vocabulary reminiscent of Cold War propaganda in the West, whilst Westerners criticised capitalism and the commodity culture with words that had been endlessly reiterated by the official Communist Party discourse.

This situation, when the language used by either side is meaningless or ridiculous for the other, has been the starting point for this article, a loose methodological framework. The following analysis will look at the early works of Estonian architect and artist Jüri Okas and will try to work between diverging languages and interpretations, reading works by Okas against the background of Anglo-american conceptualism and minimalism of the same period. The first part of the paper will analyse a print by Jüri Okas that paraphrases works by the American artist Donald Judd and will try to show how Okas' concept of minimalism differed from the Western one and the reasons behind it. The second part of the paper will focus on a conceptual book by Jüri Okas, consisting of a series of photographs of everyday and banal architectural objects, and compare it to Robert Venturi's book on *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Finally, a comparison will be made with works of Robert Smithson in the context of concepts of waste, excess and the remainders of industrial civilisation.

Jüri Okas (b.1950) graduated as an architect from the Estonian State Art Institute in Tallinn in 1974. His first films and performances were made in the early 1970s during his studies; in 1974 he also started to work in print technique. In parallel with his practice as an artist he has worked as an architect, first in a state design office *EKE projekt* that carried out projects for the local collective farms, and since 1991 in his own architectural office. From the beginning of 1970s his art projects consisted mostly of films, photo montages and performances, and since the 1980s he has concentrated on prints and installations. His first exhibition in 1976 was in fact one of the earliest attempts to use spatial installations. He was active in art till the mid-1990s, since then he has concentrated solely on his architectural practice.

Okas' photos, montages, performances and films made in the early 1970s are explicitly in the idiom of Anglo-american Minimalism and Conceptual art, in many cases he openly referred or alluded to these works. The photo and intaglio *Hommage á Donald Judd*, 1974 will be discussed below. At the same time, the physical and discursive environments he worked in and the ones represented in his works are dissimilar to the historical and political situation in which Minimalism and Conceptualism evolved. Similar developments that appeared in the art of the East and the West, due to their diverging contexts, had entirely different meanings; or, as is more important in the present framework, were described and understood in an entirely different ways.

As is well known, the official dictum in Soviet art was Socialist Realism, which had its roots in Stalinist-Zhdanovist discourse. Nevertheless, after 1955 this rigorous aesthetic approach unofficially loosened up, bringing forth a dissident art sphere that included artists with very different aesthetic preferences. Thus for several Estonian artists in the 1950s and 60s it was important to restore notions of aesthetic value and artistic autonomy in their works; this was further supported by bourgeois traditions from the inter-war periods linking art to expert use of materials and crafts. "A work of art is apolitical, self-centred object of luxury that offers aesthetic pleasure. The quality and value of the artwork is guaranteed by novel form and skilful craftsmanship", described Jaak Kangilaski, outlining the general understanding of the artistic opposition of the period². Looking for radical contemporary

examples from the west, American Abstract Expressionism was seen as a way of painting that stressed the individual handwriting of the artist. The primacy of an autonomous creator and the emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of a picture – features prohibited by the Socialist Realist dictum – offered an almost ideal combination of opposition and artistic specialisation. Later in that decade Minimalism, Pop and Conceptualism manifested the break with abstract pictorial formalism. The leftist-based ideas and vocabulary of these movements were often either not understood or found inappropriate. They revolted against notions of artistic autonomy and pictorial quality. The desire to merge art with life was too reminiscent of the official Socialist Realist program of art as propaganda. Most commonly Minimalism and Conceptualism was comprehended in terms of the older discourse and followed as *style*. Art historians Sirje Helme and Jaak Kangilaski have described this in Estonia as, “the use of the influences of the new paradigm in the framework of the old paradigm” that resulted in “aestheticizing the anti-aesthetic”³. So what western critics have seen as most valuable in neo-avant-garde – the co-articulation of the artistic and political – was upturned in conditions where this co-articulation was an official canon. Avant-garde in Estonia relied first and foremost on formal qualities and on radical aesthetic innovation, substituting the political with the private, ‘silent resistance’⁴.

‘Homage á Donald Judd’

The emergence of Minimalist works in the 1960s was marked by three significant breaks from the former abstract art. First, a shift from two-dimensional illusionist pictorial space onto real space, a change that allowed the major opponent of minimalism Michael Fried to call it also ‘literalist art’⁵. Subsequently minimalist objects did not stand on a pedestal, in the ‘siteless realm’⁶ of pure art, but were placed directly on the floor, as artworks to be comprehended here and now. That led to a second major shift which linked the viewer structurally to the work. Meaning was created by direct experience of the object instead of a fixed transcendent timeless meaning that the work got from its creator and which was communicated to the passive spectator. Thirdly, this idea of presence and externality was achieved through composition, or the lack of one in the traditional sense: using mainly repetitive, uniform structures and seriality. Artists wished to avoid notions of balance, as a device of formalist composition, and to “defeat the idea of centre or a focus”⁷, that the objects had some directionality or a priori meaning. As Donald Judd famously described his method “[This] order is not rationalistic and underlying, but is simply order; like that of continuity, one thing after another”⁸. Judd’s own work from that period illustrates these ideas, most obviously rows of identical boxes, mounted on the wall with regular intervals, erasing any possible meaning from the ‘creative’ gesture of putting these boxes together.

In 1974 Jüri Okas took a photo, *Five boxes*, of a row of five similar refuse containers in one of Tallinn’s courtyards; a later print based on the same photo was titled *Homage á Donald Judd*. It is obvious then that the piece is not only inspired by Judd but a direct paraphrase or comment on Judd and Minimalist art. That is further supported by assertion made in an interview in 1989, “A thing is what it is. It does not represent anything else than that which it is”⁹, almost like paraphrasing Frank Stella’s famous declaration that “what you see is what you see”. Can we then look at Okas’ work through a Minimalist perspective? These two works pose several problems that seem central to an understanding of Okas’ work and to the question of the differences between American Minimalism and Okas’ interpretation of it. First of all, looking at both pictures, there is the obvious visual similarity with Judd’s works, the boxes stand just as a series, without any special arrangement, referring to the minimalist break with compositional patterns. The distinction between the photo and the print is initially clear: *Five boxes* is a preparatory photo, a documentation of a street situation, whilst the intaglio with its additional montage-marks, signs of the creative agent, is an ‘artwork’, homage to Judd. This interpretation is complicated by Okas who in conversation says *Five boxes* was also initially titled *Homage á Donald Judd*¹⁰. It is possible that the work functions as a parody of Minimalist literalism, substituting the ‘meaningless’ rows of boxes with very meaningful garbage containers. This however seems doubtful as Minimalist structures, ‘one thing after another’, reappear in other works by Okas. Although Okas was influenced by Pop-art, *Homage á Donald Judd* does not fit as a Pop

gesture either, as the containers do not present strong enough iconic features of everyday consumer goods. One could read the containers through the framework of Russian Conceptualism and especially Ilya Kabakov. The letters KL, an Estonian abbreviation standing for 'central city', and the different number combinations seen on them index their belonging to the local apartment administration office, like Kabakov's *Zhek*¹¹, and could be seen as a narrative of banal daily life in a Soviet city. Yet, the conceptual art of Kabakov, in its openly political exploitation of the Soviet everyday, "the emptiness of official rituals, the worn-out figures of speech of the dominant ideology discourse"¹², is anything but close to the realm of Conceptualism as Okas saw it.

Supported by the author's notion that he wanted to show "these [Judd's] works also existing around here"¹³, it is clear that the photo is based on idealist, (mis)reading of Minimalism: as "[capturing] pure forms, [mapping] logical structures [and depicting] abstract thought"¹⁴. Contrary to Conceptualism, Minimalist artists refused "systems built beforehand, a priori systems"¹⁵ and sought to overcome the pure abstract realm with immediate experience. Opposed to the questions about the essence and being of art that Conceptualism posed, it concentrated on the perceptual conditions of the artwork; how it was experienced and the framework where it existed. What Okas seems to do is seeing these works from a Conceptualists' viewpoint. As art critic Johannes Saar has described:

Okas has chosen a foreshortening and an angle that systematizes the motif indicating desertedness into an organised structure, he divides the space on the picture into geometric segments and represents on the printed sheet the final result as a vision of a rigid system in the midst of incidental world¹⁶

Not only does this quote give a precise account of the 'specific objects' viewed as abstract structures, but it also reveals how this happens, "in choosing the foreshortening and an angle", in taking a photo of this particular situation, or more precisely cropping it out from the disorder of the 'incidental' world. This particular reading of Minimalism, as mapping the 'timeless' geometries that underlie the most apparent visible sphere, is in fact decisive in the whole of the oeuvre of Okas.

Both, Krauss and Foster, argue the main importance of Minimalism to be the "birth of the viewer", impeding the idealist perception with phenomenological contingency of the "body in particular space and time"¹⁷, the meaning of the work becomes public. In the Soviet context, where most of the works by unofficial artists never made it to the gallery space, the audience of avant-garde art was absent or existed only as a circle of fellow artists. The significant break of Minimalist objects from the abstract pictorial realm onto real space can be comprehended first and foremost in the context of the Western gallery system. In Estonia, if Okas's *Five boxes* acted as Minimalist ready-mades, of which the photo would just be a documentation, then its audience would become all the random passers-by (creating a totally meaningless art-situation). For Okas the question is different: how to make people see this row of containers as a structured system, how to capture those potential viewers who walk by it every day? The main task is then to make people see as he does; making or finding the object physically would then be altogether useless. So instead of an artist who makes or creates art he becomes an artist who *sees* art. Borrowing from Robert Smithson:

A great artist can make art by simply casting a glance. A set of glances could be as solid as any thing or place, but the society continues to cheat the artist out of his "art of looking" by only valuing "art objects".¹⁸

Contrary to Minimalism that redefines rather than rejects the art object, this act of 'casting a glance' dissolves the need for a material presence of the work itself, valuing an idea rather than a form¹⁹. This move shifts the discussion of course to the realm of Conceptual art and on the use of photo as the favourite media for documenting the idea. An analysis of Jüri Okas' photos made from 1974-1986 and published in a book *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture* offers further illumination of this point.

The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture

Apart from a short text in front, *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture* is entirely composed of different photos depicting architectural objects, either utilitarian, everyday and usually unnoticeable or unusual and irregular. There are also close-up pictures of wall surfaces, different textures of bricklaying or the 'palimpsest' of wallpapers; pictures of landscape changed by human activity, ditches and furrows, and so on. The objects are usually shot frontally and the high concentration on the surface of the item often lifts the object out of its surroundings or makes it look like a montage. Stylistically they are reminiscent of the typological series of gas furnaces, water tanks, vernacular dwellings etc. by Bernd and Hilla Becher, but, then again, the function and type of the buildings is not important for Okas. A short manifesto states that the aim of the book is to show the 'essential', to make the viewers 'see', 'recognize and grasp':

It is possible

- to look and not see
- to see and not notice the essential
- to recognize and not grasp
- to know and not acknowledge
- to possess and not admit it

It is possible

- to look and see
- to see and notice the essential
- to recognize and grasp the aesthetic impact
- to be aware of the laws of order and disorder
- to possess and admit it
- to question the validity of trivial evaluations fixed in our consciousness: modern, old fashioned, original, dull, commonplace, drab, beautiful and ugly.²⁰

The text is ambiguous, not revealing what exactly is meant by 'essential' or 'possessing and admitting it'; and if *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture* has been viewed as a kind of philosophical credo of Okas' works, a suitable metaphor for the appeal of philosophy to Conceptual art, it is at the same time difficult to understand what kind of 'philosophy' this is. It is probably for this reason that the book has been interpreted in entirely different ways, seen on the one hand as "the most authentic deconstructive architectural book"²¹ and on the other hand as representing "pure transcendent idea" and "aesthetics that can be without shame named Platonic"²². In opposition to both of these interpretations, the photographs may also be looked at in the architectural or historical context of their time and linked to the above discussion of Okas' artworks.

One of the first times the photographs were printed publicly was in early 1980s in a local architectural magazine; in the same issue they also illustrated an article about Robert Venturi's architectural theory, as local examples of Venturian 'sensitivity'²³. Venturi was an important figure for the generation of young architects in the second half of 1970s in Estonia. In a recent conversation Okas named him as one of his influences at that time. Venturi's break in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* with the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture, was suitable in Estonia where the industrialisation of the entire building process had created a strong revolt against monotonous Modernist buildings and a wish to restore architecture as art. The generally optimistically viewed Khrustsev reforms in late 1950s, took a politically negative turn after the suppression of mass-demonstrations in Prague in spring 1968, and resulted in a Brezhnevist stagnation of the state in the 1970s. Similarly the egalitarian promise of modernist prefabricated system-built housing in the 1960s had offered a

liberating contrast to the communal apartments of Stalin's era, but by the 1970s it had turned into a rigid unchangeable production line that wholly dominated the architectural output of the large state design-offices. The Venturian postmodernist gaze to the classical Western architectural heritage was therefore seen as a gesture that restored the individual freedom of the architect-as-creator and offered a nostalgic image of the past. In Estonia this phenomenon became associated with the decades of independence, 1920s and 30s, and the local Functionalist and Art Deco heritage.

Okas' *The Concise Dictionary* is related to Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* primarily in its principle. Venturi's celebration of the ambiguous and non-straightforward, "positively banal or vulgar" is the same as that which Sirje Helme described as "architectural objects with no particular style: odd, out of place"²⁴ in Okas' book. The illogical additions and unusual changes to buildings in *The Concise Dictionary* resonate with Venturi's discussion of contradictory levels and distorted elements in buildings. Significant similarities and divergences between Okas and Venturi appear connected to the latter's discussion of order. Venturi writes, "you build an order up and then break it down, but break it down from strength rather than from weakness.../ Order must exist before it must be broken"²⁵. We find a similar standpoint later in Okas on the balance between construction and destruction in his works, "[if] you have a certain structure or a model then you have to start taking parts away from it. At one point the construction either collapses or will be suspended at some kind of indeterminate level"²⁶. Although it has been noted that Venturi does not explain what the further content of his 'order' is, either following formal organisation or functional logic, it is clear that his approach is strictly disciplinary, empirical, relativistic, and anti-platonic. At the same time Venturi presents architecture as a timeless, 'supra-historical' category without seeing the particular changes in their form or program as connected to historical and social processes; it is for him a self-evolutionary hermetic discipline. Likewise, as in the case of the *Hommage à Donald Judd* discussed above, *The Concise Dictionary* presents the objects freed from their particular historical framework, the author wants us to see them as timeless and free from the social or economic processes that caused them. In that case the 'essential', rather than being a Platonic notion, is meant in a strictly professional way, as referring to the essence of architecture and building. Okas' interest in 'the laws of order and disorder' were reflected in a series of intaglios, made throughout 1970s, that were based on black-and-white photos of ordinary structures or environments, with black squares and lines drawn upon them, resembling montage technique. Very often these lines form constructivist structures laid upon the depicted image, as if modifying the real situation, fragmenting the space and creating illogical perspective constructs. The viewer can concentrate either on the graphic layer or on the photograph; the graphic layer does not always agree with the realist material. Upsetting the coherence of photographic space in these pictures he tests the truthfulness and limits of representation in these images.

Venturian break with modernist normativity can be compared to similar processes in American art of the period. Though in his discussion on ambiguity Venturi mentions Abstract Expressionism, Op-, and Pop-art as his artistic allies, and stresses above else the ambiguity inherent in visual perception, the main focus of his argument against the modernist practice is somewhat analogous to shifts initiated by minimal art and other processes described in the above chapter. According to Rosalind Krauss the ethos of Greenbergian aesthetics is grounded in modernist culture's aim to rationalise each of its disciplines to correspond to a 'separate domain of experience', narrowing down the discipline by concentrating only to its specific area of competence. In that division, painting was left with a task of 'displaying the conditions of vision itself'. As described earlier, Minimalism broke from this illusionist optical realm onto real space and stressed the perceptual contingency of its art. Venturi, respectively, disproved the idea that "the functional organisation of a building obeyed a unitary logic which constituted its aesthetic meaning"²⁷ and argued for multiple logics and features that determined the design of a building; thus breaking from the narrowly specialised normative post-war modern architecture. Similarly to Judd, who against the Greenbergian category of 'quality' in paintings stressed that, "a work of art need only to be interesting"²⁸, Venturi wrote that, "I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure', compromising rather than 'clean', distorted rather than 'straightforward', ambiguous rather than 'articulated', perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as

‘interesting’²⁹. This replacement of ‘quality’ with ‘interest’ has been described by Hal Foster as an avant-gardist transgression of the measurable (good or bad) aesthetic tradition with the ill-fitting and experimental, “quality is a criterion of normative criticism, an encomium bestowed upon aesthetic refinement; interest is an avant-gardist term, often measured in terms of epistemological disruption”³⁰.

Of course, Venturi’s solution led him to uncritically embrace the commercial and popular everyday as the new vernacular and lined him up soon with the neo-conservative Post-Modernist front. In contrast to the Minimal/Conceptual art genealogy that came to question art as an institution, Venturi, who understood architecture as self-enclosed, formal discipline simply “recouped the low for the high”³¹ and left the category of architecture intact, further more, presenting this category as continuous with the whole of Western architecture, it enabled the neo-conservative return to history-*cum*-style in the 1970s and early 1980s.

These fine partitions are key also in analysing Okas’ *The Concise Dictionary*. On the one hand there is a strong anti-institutional accent in his pictures: he photographs most ordinary dwellings or rear facades of historic buildings, extending the domain of architecture to include the odd and the everyday. He wishes to go beyond the art-historical gloss of identifying styles or social implications of monumental buildings, such buildings were included for reasons other than their canonical value. For example the Estonia Theatre in photomontage *Egg*, 1972, in which the architectural features *per se* are not important. He wants us to see the buildings and structures as pointing to unchanging, timeless principles underlying architectural constructions and human interventions in nature in general. Parallel to Venturian recuperative procedure from low to high, it is possible to see *The Concise Dictionary* as an example of the process described in the introduction as “aestheticizing the anti-aesthetic”. Though this may in many instances be true, for example the striking flatness of the architectural objects in the pictures turns them into canvases, it would at this point be too great a generalisation of Okas’ artworks.

The discussion of the technique of ‘looking and seeing’ in conjunction with the photograph *Hommage á Donald Judd*, focused on the extraction of a piece of the seemingly unsystematic world with a particular angle and foreshortening of the camera thereby cropping it out from its context as an ordered structure. Quoting Robert Smithson, the conclusion was made that the artist, from then on, needed only to *see* art, instead of making or finding it. If Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* offered a historically grounded and theoretical parallel to Jüri Okas’ *Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture* then its technique and content, the things on the pictures, remind of Robert Smithson’s works, notably of an illustrated article *The Monuments of Passaic*³².

The article gives a scrupulous account of the artist’s one-day trip to Passaic, describing equally dispassionately the street signs on the way and his emotions in seeing the surrounding prosaic landscape. Equipped with a camera, Smithson took numerous pictures of industrial wastelands, pipes, bridges, children’s sandboxes, describing them as ‘monuments’ and titling them with relevant vocabulary, for example calling pipes that gushed water into the river *The Fountain Monument*. But most unusual is his explanation of the landscape as already a photograph:

Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of “stills” through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel.../33

Smithson’s confusing of the difference between reality and its image complicates and collapses also “the hierarchy of object and representation, the first being the source of the authority and prestige of the second”³⁴. The monuments he writes about are so only in the accompanying photographs. Likewise, the ‘essential’ that Okas wants us to notice and grasp in the *Concise Dictionary* is there in the photos, and it is first and foremost there that we can ‘look and see’. ‘Photographing a photograph’ is then recording one’s own mental construct, of the world as photos, which gets its real status in the representation. As Helena Sederholm has put it: “we project the psyche

onto an outside world and act as if what we had projected is a quality of the world.”³⁵ This is perhaps one reason that several photos in the *Concise Dictionary* remind very strongly of montage images. Even more proof of the assumption that Okas, like Smithson, takes pictures of pictures is found in the numerous ‘frames’ in the landscape, or the use of effects of the ‘monstrous light-bulb’.

Writers on Okas have described him as ‘seeing life through art’, or ‘[being] spoilt by his art orientated home /.../ [he] probably sees the surrounding world through the prism of art’³⁶. These observations, although similar to the example described by Smithson, derive from different accounts of his works and are connected to the changes in the status of artist in the 1970s. If in the West Minimalism had opposed the Abstract-Expressionist mythical creator with almost an erasure of the creative agent, then Conceptualism restored or rather redefined the importance of the authorial subjectivity, in a new ‘critical-discursive guise’³⁷ i.e. artist as the origin of the ‘idea’ in the artwork. Neo-conservative Post Modernism, largely restored the author as the sole originator of the work’s meaning. In Estonia where unofficial art strove for autonomy, trying in contrast to Socialist Realism to show that there is more to art than just political propaganda, one of the ways for the artist to stress his opposition was by elaborating his personal handwriting. Also, if Socialist Realism was orientated to a wide audience and straightforward comprehension, then the avant-garde was seen as something intentionally complex to understand and elitist in its position. Conceptualism’s focus on artist’s persona was warmly welcomed in that climate, isolating the avant-garde artist even more in his own reality. This explains the sometimes almost religious accounts of Okas’ work. Most exemplary is one of the longest accounts on Okas in the 80s, a text published in a widely read literary magazine ‘Vikerkaar’ in 1988, by Tamara Luuk, one of the leading Estonian art critics of the time. Describing the 1970s as a period when, “people believed /.../that human beings could be burdened with the role of the demiurg”, she stressed, “talent, this human gift of divine origin”, as a particularly highly valued character in art. Transforming this tone to Okas (she sees his prints representing, “extremely democratic and generally accessible material /.../ in an extremely elitist way”) she ends the piece taking Conceptualism’s artistic position to an absolute limit, saying, “[and] it does not matter whether one /.../ goes on to act or to avoid acting”. He is a creator.”³⁸ Her earlier statement that Okas sees life through art is then connected to a rather different understanding of Smithson’s seeing the world as already a photograph. For Luuk it is a semi-religious escape from the world, the above “aestheticizing the anti-aesthetic”, whereas Smithson wants to show the simulacrum condition of our experience, when there is no way to tell the difference between the copy and the original.

But there is one more significant aspect about Smithson’s article compared to Okas’ work. The contents of their photos appears to be similar. Representing examples of human building activity they both tend to look for objects that are not only odd or dull but superfluous and useless, a kind of excess of the industrial civilisation. For Smithson this condition of the world-as-entropy is central for his whole oeuvre; Okas does not address it consciously but registers it nevertheless as an effect of the environment, but with other intentions. If Smithson speaks about the ‘ruins in reverse’: “buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built”³⁹, then Okas speaks about the border of construction and destruction as his central interest, but does so with a likewise example: “If you build a house /.../ there exists a certain situation, when it is not possible to define, if this house is either demolished or being built. /.../ The composition of all my pictures and installations convey that feeling of oscillating on the razor’s edge”⁴⁰. This surplus, “waste that inevitably accompanies production”⁴¹, refers to entropy (useless energy) on the architectural or urban level. The post-war industrialisation had by 1970s produced a visible left-over of its structures; as Yves-Alain Bois has described, “these remainders are imperceptible until the point of no return has been reached”⁴². Smithson perceived this in the massive suburban sprawl and peripheral urban wastelands. Okas, looking at environment that, “describes the human being sometimes better than the human being itself”⁴³, keeping himself ‘enormously open’, records the same phenomenon. Thus he shows not only the underlying architectural order of these structures, but the industrial society as the causal principle behind them. Here, of course, the photos come to testify to the above thesis of Susan Buck-Morss, that the core principle, building a utopia founded on industrial modernisation, of American capitalism and Soviet socialism was intrinsically the same.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper has not been to track Okas' works down under one common name or give them a fixed meaning; quite the contrary, the attempt has been made to show how the meaning can be unstable and varying, depending on the discursive background. In the art-historical framework Okas' works arise from two different origins. The Minimalist lineage, like in *Hommage à Donald Judd* is largely critical towards the visual and questions the validity of the image or replaces its primacy with an idea. The Pop and Superrealist, and in Okas' case Surrealist genealogy, uses the image as its foremost material of manipulation. On the one hand the viewer is seduced to look and see the world from the same distance, or level of openness, as the artist does, on the other hand the viewer has to be ready to track down a conjuring trick or an illusion, as the artist/ image always has a power to overlay her/ him.

Similarly complicated is the political or historical framework: living in Estonia which was part of the Soviet Union, Okas followed consciously, as much as was possible, the Anglo-american art world, and still today would like himself to be viewed in this context⁴⁴; his works deal with the surrounding industrial environment, its entropic excess, but he repeatedly stresses they are not socially critical.

In the West the neo-avant-garde artist tried to break art into life, to reduce the border between the daily and the artistic; the art object was refuted as bourgeois luxury-item and instead Conceptual art stressed the primacy of the idea. In the Soviet Union where art had officially the role of propaganda, the avant-garde, or non-official art, saw its role as separate and as autonomous from life as possible. Thus Western radical ideas were mostly followed as a *style*, by relying on their appearances. The critical power of Jüri Okas' works is seen in the example of *The Concise Dictionary of Modern Architecture* that consists of photographs taken over the period of twelve years. The pictures representing industrial, vernacular or odd utilitarian buildings reinterpret the notion of architecture and offer an original institutional critique, but more than that, they represent the flip side of the industrial modernism, the everyday reality of which was independent of the political cartographies of the Cold War.

¹ S. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, 236.

² J. Kangilaski, 'Paradigma muutus 1970. aastate laane kunstis ja selle kajastus Eesti kunstielus', in *Kunstist, Eestist ja Eesti kunstist*, Tartu 2000, 225.

³ S. Helme, J. Kangilaski, *Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, Tallinn 1999, 184.

⁴ Helme, Kangilaski, *Lühike Eesti kunsti ajalugu*, 135.

⁵ M. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' in G. Battcock (ed.), *Minimal art: a critical anthology*, Los Angeles 1995, 117.

⁶ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass. 1996, 38.

⁷ R. E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass. 1977, 250.

⁸ D. Judd, 'Specific Objects' in C. Harrison, P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford 1992, 811.

⁹ J. Miettinen, 'Taiteeni ei ole muuttunut, vaan ympäristö ja vastaanotto', *Pro Estonia*, Vol. 2, 1989, 4.

¹⁰ Interview between Jüri Okas and the author (Tallinn, 23 July 2001); this is asserted also by other title changes in the album of his works from 2000 as compared to an exhibition catalogue from 1987.

¹¹ Kabakov created in his art a fictional apartment and urban neighbourhood administration, Zhek no 8; see: M. Tupitsyn, 'About Early Soviet Conceptualism', *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, New York 1999, 100.

¹² S. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment. Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London 1994, 63.

¹³ Interview between Jüri Okas and the author (Tallinn, 30 July 2001).

¹⁴ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 40.

¹⁵ Originally in: D. Judd in 'Questions to Stella and Judd' in Battcock, *Minimal art*, 156; quoted from: Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 40.

¹⁶ Saar, 'Jüri Okase kristallmaastikud', *Postimees*, 9.03.1996, 13.

¹⁷ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 40; see also: Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 266.

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