Visions of Anarchic Space in 1980s Estonian Architecture and Performance Art

Ingrid Ruudi

In research into art and architecture during the Soviet era, one cannot pass over the question of the social implications of cultural production. During the last two decades we have seen a whole array of positions, starting from a model based on the clear-cut oppositions between collaborationist and so-called underground practices towards more recent nuanced readings. It used to be common to base the discussion on binary opposites like the Party and the People, oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, truth and simulation, etc, distinguishing between the 'real' and „the 'simulated', leading towards conceptualizing of the Soviet person as somehow schizophrenic. Interestingly, this model of binary oppositions has been strongly held by cultural producers themselves, who have maintained even until this day their dissident heroism. In the last decade, instead of black and white opposition, a lot of grey tones have entered into the discourse. One of the most fruitful recent contributions has been by the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, who has challenged the common belief that the collapse of the Soviet system was made possible because during the whole Soviet period socialism was perceived as 'bad', 'immoral' and 'imposed' by the Soviets. Instead, Yurchak described the relationship toward ideology as dynamic and 'situated', whereby seemingly contradictory positions and beliefs could be reconciled within a person's mind.[1] It became increasingly important to reproduce the formal signifiers of ideological discourse, up to the point where the formal repetition somehow froze the rituals, and the form

of ideological discourse was increasingly floating free of its content. Yurchak has described this ritualized, hollowed-out performing of ideological gestures with the term 'performative shift', whereby the significance of gestures became a thing in itself, having lost touch with the initial, or the supposed, meaning of them.[2] The appearance of Soviet reality was working as a mask, and behind it, and within it, people were by the 1980s quite comfortably incorporating their much more heterogical everyday practices and social points of view. However, as Yurchak notes, what is important in this shift is that the participants of the system, the performers, were not fully aware of these workings. The introduction of perestroika, also initially meant only as a reform and not as a shaking of the foundations of the Soviet social and economical system, rendered suddenly visible this logic of the performative shift— the system of masks was suddenly there for all to see.

In my paper I shall try to focus on this most complex period of the falling off of the masks: the era from the proclamation of perestroika in the middle of the 1980s until 1991, which in the case of Estonia meant the re-establishment of an independent state. I shall focus on the practice of a new radical interdisciplinary grouping called Rühm T (Group T), initiated by the young architects Raoul Kurvitz and Urmas Muru and producing a wide array of creation ranging from architecture through painting and installations to performances. I'm primarily interested in the reciprocal relationship of Group T's conceptual architecture drawings and performance
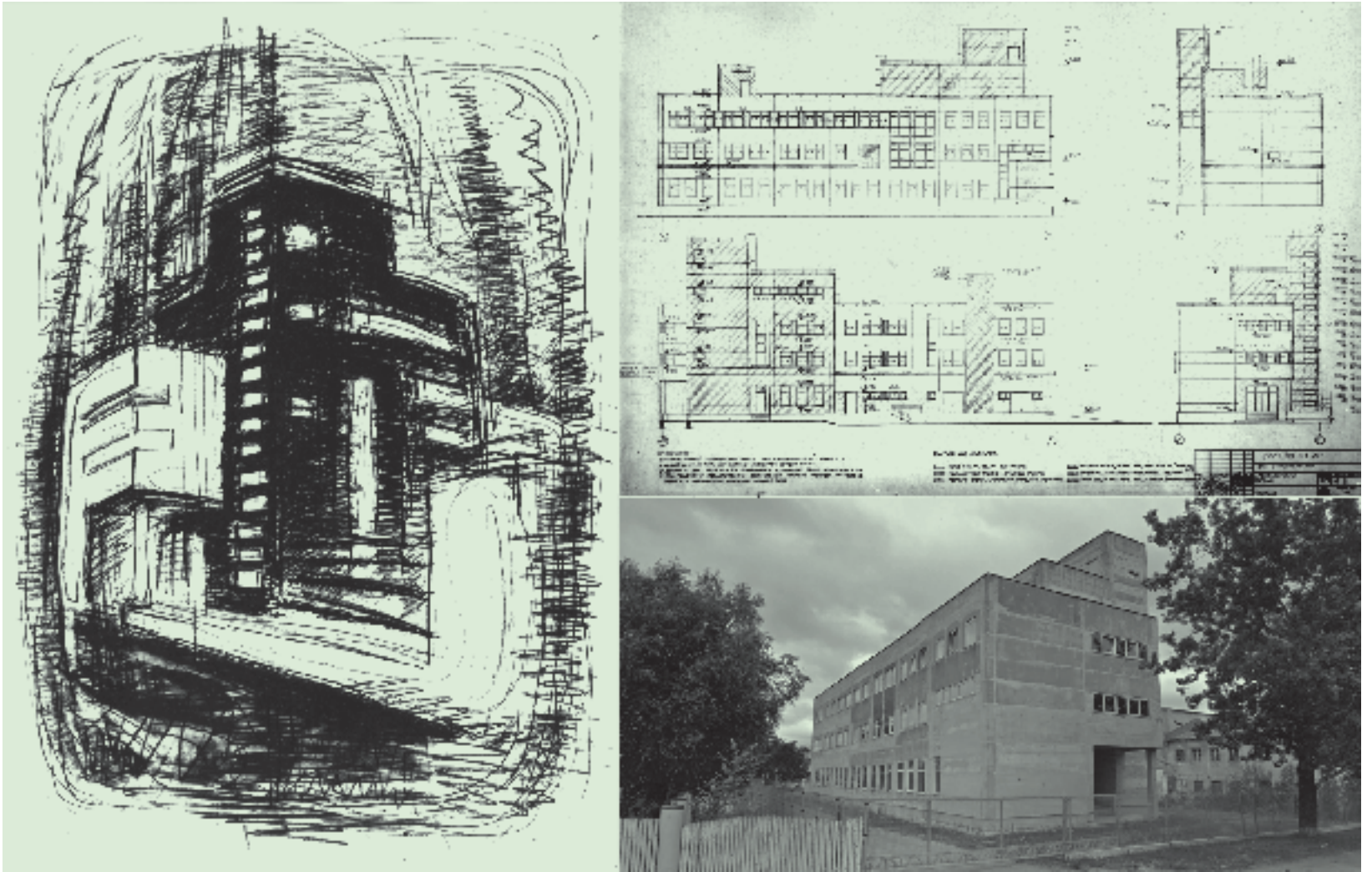
acts – what kind of space is imagined or produced? What is the relationship of the ephemeral or conceptual spaces thus created towards the social situation? Could this be read in terms of critical or dissident architecture[3] similarly as the examples known from the 1970s, or does the rapidly changing social situation render the critical, oppositional position more vague – what is the target of the criticism now? As the members of Group T themselves proclaimed their activities as being driven by anarchist impulses, what could it mean in the context of the end of 1980s social situation – a time when, on the one hand, the performative shift became visible, and on the other hand, nationalist impulses resurfaced and were consolidated towards regaining of independence? I propose that these questions might help a rethinking of the social and cultural processes during perestroika, and diversify the dominant reading of the end of the 1980s as a homogeneous, consolidated phase of national romanticist cultural production in Estonia.

Raoul Kurvitz and Urmas Muru graduated the Estonian Academy of Arts at the beginning of the 1980s. Ahead of them was the generation of so-called Tallinn school, which had revolutionized the local architectural scene in the 1970s, reclaiming the position of the architect as a creative individual in culture through a succession of conceptual projects and some examples of remarkable architecture, mainly commissioned by the kolkhoz system.[4] By the 1980s the Tallinn school architects had established their position quite firmly and were even, in

some instances, attempting an international breakthrough with contextual, post-modernist architecture. Among other things, the Tallinn school reintroduced values and notions like context, environment, locality, sustainability, while looking fondly back upon the heritage of the pre-war independent republic of Estonia. Their manifestation took place in the context of ongoing production of Soviet mass housing and necessarily attained the connotations of progressive resistance and nationalism. At the beginning of the 1980s it was hard to see a different kind of resistant position for an architect. But the Group T members tried to push this architect-artist attitude even further, also aiming at a revolutionizing of the rather conservative art scene. Raoul Kurvitz, the initiator of the group, invited the participation of various painters, musicians, poets and even a philosopher, in order to transform the mid-1980s Estonian art scene through exhibitions and performance events that transgressed the received notions of art. Their first exhibition as a group was in 1986 in the snowy back yard of an art museum in Tallinn, with exhibitions following yearly until 1991, when the group more or less dissolved. Group T must be credited for introducing a particular form of performance art to Estonia – a highly ritualised, mystical practice – and for freshening the art scene with neo-expressionist paintings. They also revived the genre of manifesto, with each exhibition accompanied by one such declaration. As background, one must also mention their strong connections with the local punk rock, and later techno, music scene,

Vision and reality: Raoul Kurvitz.
ETUI (Building Research Institute) building, Tallinn, 1987.
(Raoul Kurvitz's private archive.)

and an interest in various poststructuralist strands of philosophy, hitherto unfamiliar in Estonia. Generally, the Group T architects kept separate their artistic and architectural production. Art events featured paintings, installations, and performances; architecture was exhibited separately or published in magazines where they advocated conceptual drawing as a means of architectural production in itself.[5] However, it seems that it would be most fruitful to interpret their architecture in juxtaposition with performance events and also in the context of their varied written productions.

The core group – Raoul Kurvitz, Urmas Muru and also Peeter Pere – were daily working in the Estonian Industrial Project, a workplace widely considered the least imaginative among career possibilities in Estonian architecture. They counterbalanced the situation with a conscious focus on architecture's experimental side that found an outlet mainly in various forms of conceptual drawings. Regarding architecture, their inspirations were of a different kind from those of the earlier Tallinn school – by that time, the ideas of a new attitude, later to be amalgamated under the term 'deconstructivist architecture' after an exhibition of the same name at MoMA in 1988, had started to filter through to Soviet Estonia. The everyday reality at the Estonian Industrial Project, designing warehouses, railroad infrastructure, factory buildings, boilerhouses, power substations, etc, was a far cry from the conceptual and theoretical fireworks of, say, Coop Himmelb(l)au or Bernard Tschumi. But this passionate attitude, completely devoid of idealism or illusions of any kind, immediately rang a bell with youngsters who related

more to punk events than office routine; the disadvantages of their starting position were quickly inverted to celebrate the industrial in the manner of Sant'Elia, writing up a manifesto for technodelic architecture.

Actually named 'A manifesto for technodelic expressionism'[6], this is a text deliberately full of paradoxes, starting from the name, coined by a merging of 'technology' and 'psychedelic'. The name was explained as 'a revelation of the technological world in a state of trance'. The text called for 'a completely new architectural sensibility that would combine contemporary technological advances and absolute subjectivity, a juxtaposition of industrial and organic impulses. This kind of architecture must be born from hallucinations and ecstasy, it is an environment for dreams and for realizing one's hidden passions. Technodelic expressionist designs as if delivering an erotic confession. Architectural forms are the residual products of emotions.'[7]

In this passionate, if slightly vague, manifesto it is hard not to see a parallel with Coop Himmelb(l)au's plea for a blazing architecture of the same time: "We want architecture that has more. Architecture that bleeds, that exhausts, that whirls, and even breaks. Architecture that lights up, stings, rips, and tears under stress. Architecture has to be cavernous, fiery, smooth, hard, angular, brutal, round, delicate, colorful, obscene, lustful, dreamy, attracting, repelling, wet, dry, and throbbing. Alive or dead. If cold, then cold as a block of ice, if hot, then hot as a blazing wing. Architecture must blaze."[8]

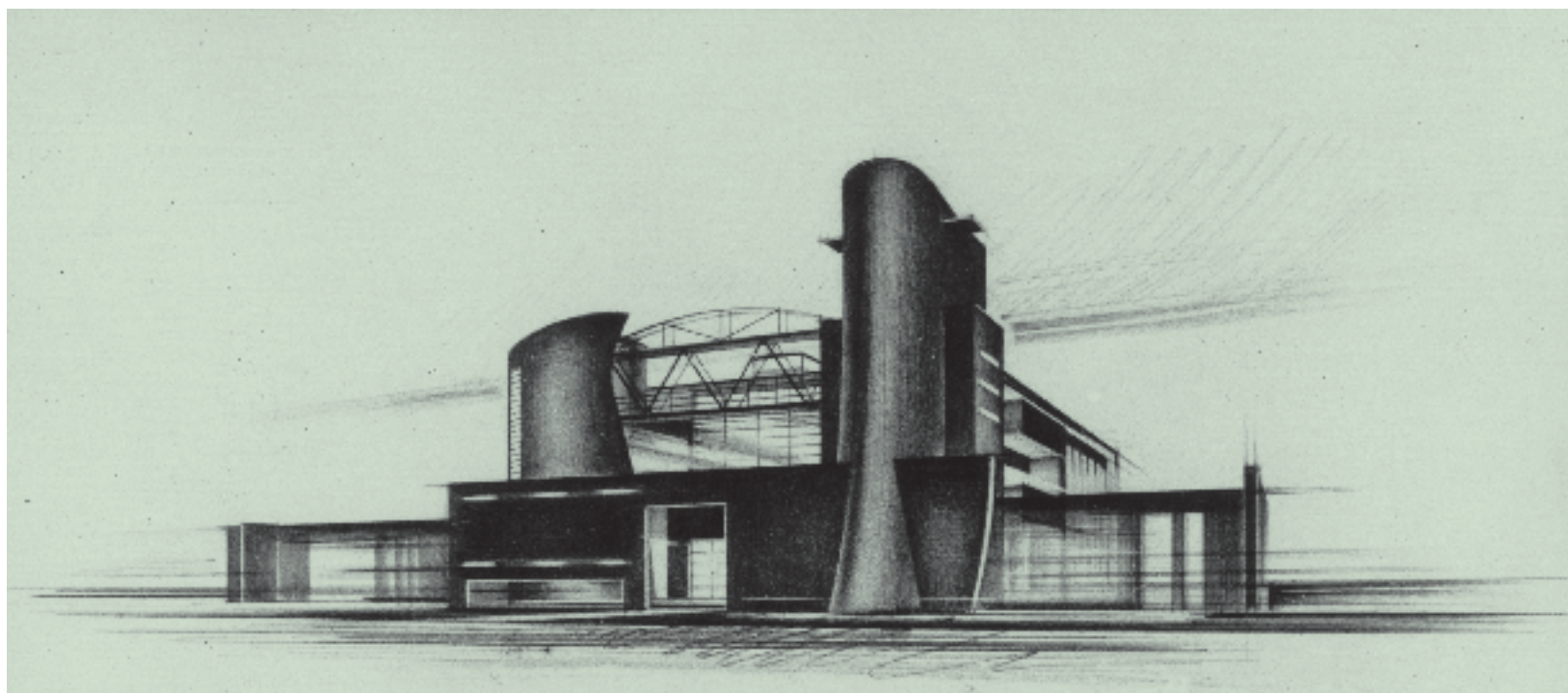However, the manifesto for technodelic expressionism has another side: this very individualistic

pathos is surprisingly combined with the concept of national subconscious: "architecture stems from specific climatic and racial features – the indifferent and harsh nature that has conditioned the Estonian temperament and biological code has resulted in a static, inward-looking architecture. Yet, this austerity is not our permanent feature: the same energy may be turned outwards instead, to unleash the stern movements."[9] And to conclude again with a paradox: "Expressionist architecture is hallucinations and delirium plus maximum discipline."[10] So the manifesto, seemingly very individualistic in its focus on subjective impulses as sources for design, does also contain a social dimension, a message to its era: to shake free the hitherto restrained energies, to build up a new world of maximum liberation.
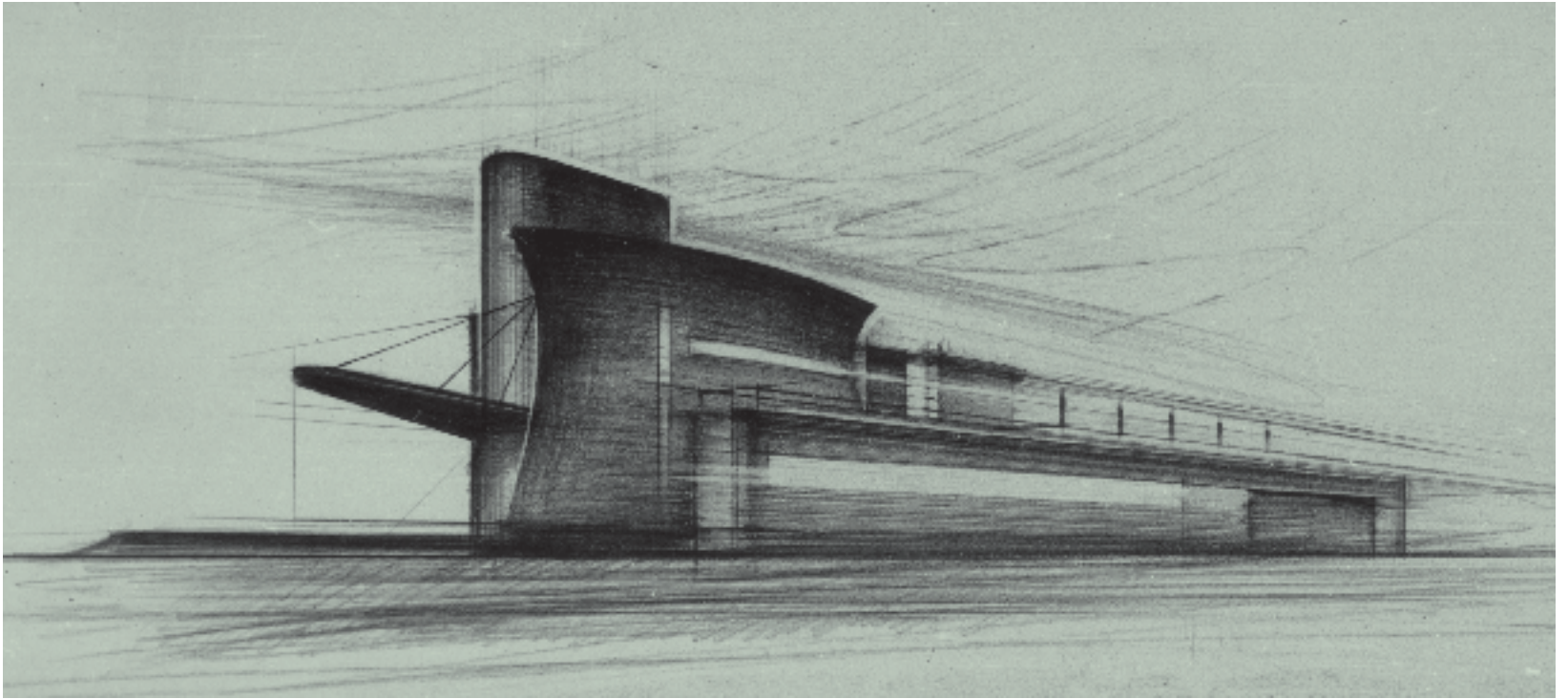
How did these calls for liberation and ecstasy manifest themselves in architectural design? There are several things that strike the eye when looking at the drawings of Group T. Firstly, as the formal references to expressionism and constructivism are obvious, these forms are not conceived in anticipation of some kind of new, utopian world. Although Bruno Taut was one of the main references in Urmas Muru's article in a youth magazine promoting conceptual drawing in architecture[11], in their actual drawings the expressionist forms have attained a somehow sinister touch. And although Urmas Muru explained the whole idea of conceptual projects in terms of creating visions ahead of their time, his actual drawings resemble more an anticipation not of a future utopia but rather some kind of post-humanist era. Moreover, whereas classically, visionary architecture has been preoccupied with imagining a new

or alternative kind of space – whether in drawings, elevations, plans, or models, the target has been a vision of space as a three-dimensional container, a space which hypothetically might be inhabited, bodily occupied – this is certainly not the case here. The drawings never depict an interior or even hint at the possibility of space as a container. Perhaps one could even see that they lack the feeling of three-dimensionality, feeling rather as masks. The feeling is the strongest with Urmas Muru's black-and-white pencil drawings, dynamic and restrained at the same time – it is hard to imagine spaces behind these facades. It is even more striking because Group T architects actually never did real 'conceptual' drawings – all of the images are supposedly elevations of real commissions at the Estonian Industrial Project office – boiler houses, substations, port buildings, etc. Thus it must have been a deliberate choice to detach the depicted world from the slightest reference to the possibility of real space as a kind of strategy against reality. The same impulse is even more clearly manifest in the collages of Peeter Pere, again presented as official elevations of the designs, and often included as such in an anachronistic manner in technical design files or the official reports. More than Urmas Muru's restrainedly cool but tense building-masks, the compositions of Pere represent a direct violation, and undoing of architecture. His collages may be viewed as the unrestrained culmination of the impulse to go against architecture.

This destructive impulse may be interpreted with the help of Georges Bataille, who has likened the role of architecture for a society to that of Lacan's mirror stage in the development of the person.[12] Creating

Urmas Muru. Computing centre in Pärnu, 1988. (Museum of Estonian Architecture.)

Urmas Muru. Tallinn Greenery Board, s.a.
(Museum of Estonian Architecture.)

architecture, in that sense, would constitute a mirror stage for a society, for our social image. Architecture is the authorized superego of a society, and thus for Bataille, equalled to a prison. Yet Bataille's architecture as conditioner of societal behaviour is different from that of Foucault, who sees space as the embodiment of power technologies and the carrier of power/knowledge relations. Whereas Foucault's space is something that surrounds, frames, encompasses, sees, conditions, orders and produces, effectual by being unnoticeable, Bataille's architecture as prison is primarily representation. Bataille and Foucault have different conceptions of the essence of power and that of the subject. Where Foucault sees architectural space as one of the agents or means producing the subject, Bataille sees it as the mouthpiece of societal order, oppressing subjects. To counter the oppression, Bataille looks for a space before the formation of the subject and the emergence of meaning – a space that would be non-subjective, non-meaningful. However, going against architecture is not enough. Or rather, it is indispensable but nevertheless futile. Because architecture is anthropomorphous, and the primary prison for Bataille is not social but physical – one's own body. This is taking to extreme the primeval equation of architecture and the human body, the long tradition of Western architectural thought which sees the body as the measure of architecture and architecture as the equivalent of the body. Reading the architectural visions of Group T through such a lens, one might see both the conceptualisation of architecture as pure representation (as in Urmas Muru's drawings) as well as an attempt to break it and search for a 'space before meaning' (as in Peeter Pere's collages).
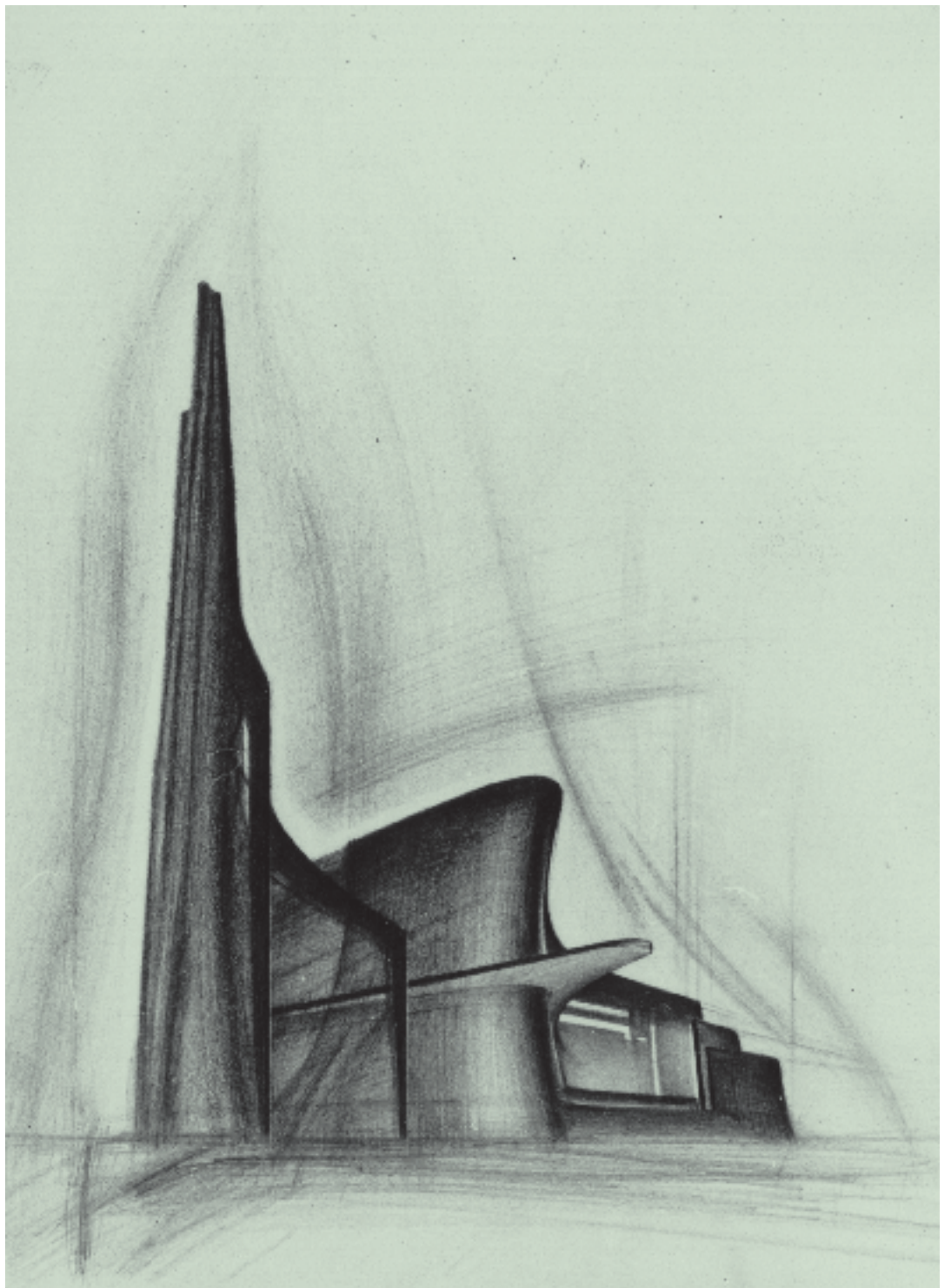
This is further explained by the performance practice of Group T. Recurring themes of their unprecedented and heavily symbol-laden performance practice were balanced on the verge of self-destruction, and a search for something inarticulate, often embodied by amorphous matter or primeval archetypes. This has so far mainly been interpr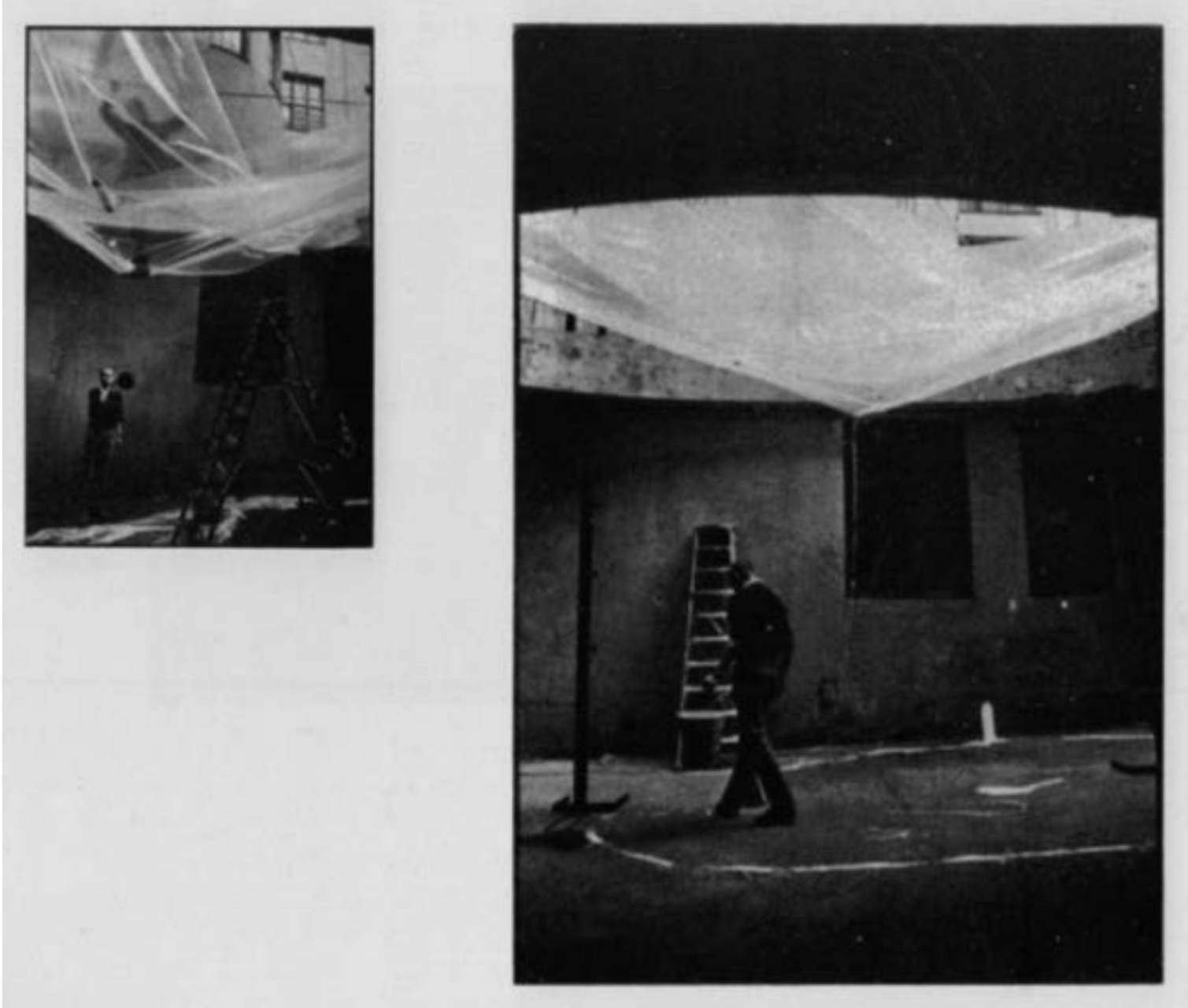eted as a token of sadomasochism, motives from the Jungian subconscious or the dialectics of violence and guilt, but the analysis has never departed from a subject-centered and decidedly asocial reading.[13] This is naturally in tune with the self-proclaimed utterly subjective, asocial and apolitical position of the Group T members; however, any such proclamations cannot be taken at face value if we take into account their objective – to decompose subjectivity and stable subject positions altogether. One of the most consistent working methods of Group T was to put oneself, one's proclamations and public image, constantly under question – once a slightly clear position or a consensual interpretation was beginning to crystallize, they instantly denounced it or claimed a contrary explanation. Juxtaposition of opposites and highlighting the state of being on the borderline were among the core ideas of Group T's performance practice[14], together with the aim to reach a point where the meaning – any idea of meaning as such – dissolves.[15] It also seems that the juxtaposition of performance and architecture could help reintroduce the excluded social dimension into their practice. In this light, destructive impulses towards one's own body are conditioned by destructive impulses towards architecture, and the individual body is reunited with the social body. As time passes, the connection evolves from the metaphorical to the more literal: from Group T's earliest performances, like the one at the opening of their third group show in 1988, where Urmas Muru's violin performance was disrupted by his suit catching fire, towards their later performances, where bodies are in more direct engagement with different architectural spaces. Such was for instance their performance at the opening of Vaal gallery in Tallinn, where there was a clear juxtaposition of the architect's rational activities in measuring and designing, and real creative forces which are amorphous, unstable and also threatening.[16] In a covered gallery courtyard with an oval opening in the ceiling, Peeter Pere was absorbed in measuring the ground, calculating and drawing an oval equivalent to the one above his head, at the same time that the oval opening, covered with plastic, began to

be filled first with water, and then a human (Urmas Muru) emerged from it, symbolising the process of birth, or creation, as opposed to the futile abstractions down on the ground. Characteristically, the process involved a strong sense of threat or possibility of self-destruction as the human body was put in a situation testing the physical laws, dependent on, among others, architectural structures, and it was not at all clear whether the plastic would withstand the load. In the performance *Eleonora* at Tallinn Art Hall, a similar opposition could be seen, as the first part involved the participants hurrying around the room with metal structures of incomprehensible purpose, clashing them against each other and attempts at dismembering them.[17] Then, the floor got covered with a vast sheet of black plastic, waving as an amorphous, formless matter (a search for Bataille's space before meanings) and an obscure poem about oceans began to be recited.[18] During all this, a human body (again, Urmas Muru) was hanging powerlessly, suspended from the ceiling. The most direct juxtaposition of the human and architectural body took place in the performance *À rebours*[19], where Urmas Muru was performing a balancing act on the balcony railing of the Helsinki Student Theatre.[20] He appeared to be 'conducting' the building, with black rectangulars that were filling all the openings of the facade, pulsating to the rhythm of the music by Allan Hmelnitski.[21] At the end of the piece, the facade 'spat out' the black rectangular cubes from its windows and openings as in a process of purging or purification, or as a sign of the internal collapse of the building, rendering the facade a hollow core.

In the turbulent period of the end of the 1980s–beginning of 1990s, the architecture and performance of Group T worked as rendering visible the 'falling of the masks' of the period, at the same time claiming that there is no illusion of any coherence or order coming as a replacement. This is an important critique, as for the majority of the local Estonian population, the era was marked by consolidation in the name of reinstating independence, a process that was conceptualised not as the creation of a new societal

Urmas Muru, Peeter Pere. Performance Oval, Tallinn, 1990 (Vaal gallery.)

order but as a restitution of a previous, pre-Second World War one, a necessary undoing of a historical disruption.[22] Such conceptualization meant curtailing the possibility of questioning of alternative paths. In architecture from the end of the 1980s this was mirrored in the emergence of architects who, as Mart Kalm has described, gave up the artist-architect position with a very rational, matter-of-fact attitude of 'a good practitioner'.[23] In this context, the Group T architects seemed at that time so anachronistic that they were almost dismissed in architecture criticism and only discussed as innovators of art. However, the anarchic position that becomes more consistent if perceived in art and architecture together is in hindsight an invaluable social commentary, being almost a critique ahead of its time, a critique of the restitutional processes and the soon to come 'normalization' of the society. The anarchy preached and practiced by Group T must be interpreted rather as a form of post-structuralist anarchy, or post-anarchy as recently conceptualised by Saul Newman[24] – in accordance with the lessons learnt from post-structuralism making the ideal of a single movement

impossible, postanarchism conceives of a political space which is indeterminate, contingent and heterogeneous; where the power of insurgency stems from it being local, unstable and individual. Instead of a coherent event with a clearly defined goal, post-anarchism thinks of revolution in terms of a multiplicity of insurrectional and autonomous spaces.[25] Thus the individualism, incommunicable private myths, absolute subjectivity and violent corporeality of Group T turn out to be not a withdrawal from the political but rather the opposite – the most political stance of constructing non-representational, heterogeneous spaces. The spatial situations generated by them both revealed the tensions of the time and aimed at generating autonomous, antagonistic spaces of their own, where would be acknowledged the implication oppressive would be acknowledged.

[1] Alexei Yurchak. Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

[2] Ibid, p 26. Earlier, Yurchak had described the same concept by the term heteronymous shift, see Alexei Yurchak, Soviet Hegemony of Form. Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More. – Comparative Studies in Society and History 45, no 3 (July): 480-510. The term performative shift stresses rather the aspect of action, as ritualized performing, than the aspect of different meanings, invoked by the word heteronymous.

[3] The case for reading oppositional or critcal architecture from the 1970s-1980s as dissident was again recently argued by Ines Weizman, see Ines Weizman, Dissidence through Architecture. – Perspecta 45: Agency. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012: 27–38.

[4] For Tallinn school, see e.g Andres Kurg, Mari Laanemets (eds). Environments, Projects, Concepts. Architects of the Tallinn School 1972–1985. Tallinn: Museum of Estonian Architecture, 2008.

[5] See e.g. Urmas Muru. Mälestused tunnetest. . – Kunst, 1989, no 2(74), or Urmas Muru. Arhitektuursed nägemused. – Noorus, 1988, no 9.

[6] The Manifesto was published in the leaflet Eesti ekspressionistlik arhitektuur 1985–1988. Tallinn: RPI Eesti Tööstusprojekt, 1988.

[7] Ibid, unpaginated.

[8] Coop Himmelb(l)au. Architecture Must Blaze. – Architecture is Now: Projects, (Un)buildings, Actions, Statements, Sketches, Commentaries, 1968–1983. New York: Rizzoli, 1983, p. 90.

[9] Eesti ekspressionistlik arhitektuur 1985–1988. Tallinn: RPI Eesti Tööstusprojekt, 1988, unpaginated.

[10] Ibid, unpaginated.

[11] Urmas Muru. Arhitektuursed nägemused.

[12] Dennis Hollier. Against Architecture. The Writings of Georges Bataille. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995.

[13] See e.g. Hanno Soans. Peegel ja piits. Mina köidikud uuemas eesti kunstis. – Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi, 10. Eesti Kunstiteadlaste Ühing, 2000, pp. 309–353.

[14] Hasso Krull, Urmas Muru. Performance – praktika surm. – Eesti Ekspress, June 14th, 1991.

[15] Hasso Krull. Ei juhtunud midagi (Eleonora). – Vikerkaar No 4, 1993.

[16] See Vaal 1990 / 2005. Tallinn: Vaal galerii, 2005.

[17] Video recordings of the performances are kept in the Centre for Contemporary Arts Estonia.

[18] The poem was portion of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-1869) by the Comte de Lautréamont, a nihilistic prose poem that was a major inspiration for the Surrealists, and the same portions were recited also in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Week End*.

[19] The title of the performance was referring to a symbolist 1884 novel of the same name by Joris-Karl Huysmans.

[20] Elisabeth Nordgren. Mellan himmel och jord. – Hufvudstadsbladet, May 10th, 1992.

[21] Conversation with Urmas Muru, April 15th, 2013.

[22] One of the most vital catchwords, especially in the second half of the 1990s, that was used in conceptualisation of Estonian culture, society, and Estonian-ness in popular rhetoric was perhaps the 'culture of disruptions', a term originally used by the philosopher Hasso Krull, and also the title of his first collection of essays, see Hasso Krull, Katkestuse kultuur. Tallinn: Vagabund 1996. The popularity of the phrase may be seen to testify to a conception of a hypothetical 'genuine' linear course of events as it was destined to be but failing to manifest itself due to constant historical disrputions; thus in creating a culture, 'reinstating' the 'true' course would be at least as important a task as creating something new.

[23] Mart Kalm. Eesti 20. sajandi arhitektuur. Estonian 20th Century Architecture. Tallinn: Prisma Prindi Kirjastus, 2001: 420.

[24] See e.g. Saul Newman. The Politics of Postanarchism. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, and Saul Newman. Postanarchism and Space: Revolutionary Fantasies and Autonomous Zones.http://postanarchistgroup. net/?page_id=265 retrieved in Jan 22nd, 2013.

[25] Saul Newman, Postanarchism and Space.