HARMONICA

Allegro
Largo
Scherzo
SILM MUNAS
ANTI-soviet Juniper
Alfred Schnittke
cosmic egg

Alexandra Badashkeeva, Artist, Illustrator, Russia

Anti-Soviet Juniper: Ülo Sooster

It is well known that there was no other art in the Soviet Union, except official social realism. As ordered by Stalin to depict solely positive aspects of the life of the Soviet people, even during the short period of the Khruschev's Thaw between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, the nation continued to live in officious chains of the cultural ideology dictated by the USSR Communist Party.

And only at the outskirts of the public life, there were atomical tendencies of something different, not griped in a vice of social realism – of the arts made by "outcasts and degenerates", as branded by the Soviet media.

In the 1960s-1970s, in the non-conformist arts there emerged artists looking for new forms of artistic statements and shaping new intellectual artistic language. They were few – only two or three dozens, and they belonged to various arts styles – from the continued tradition of the Russian avant-garde of the early century, surrealism, Dadaism, abstract expressionism, to the development of original forms of the artistic language.

These independent artists attempted to find their own creative credo and create their own artistic system based on the Russian avant-garde and

information about what had been happening in the post-war West. They included the so-called "Liazonov group" (Lidiya Masterkova, Dmitry Plavinsky), "Sretenskiy Boulevard" artists (Ülo Sooster, Viktor Pivovarov, Eduard Steinberg, Vladimir Yankilevskiy, Mikhail Shwarzman, Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Yuriy Sobolev, Ernst Neizvestniy). Along with artistic theories, there emerged various religious, mystical and metaphysical teachings. In 1962, the group named Dvizheniye (Movement) was formed, with Francisco Infante-Arana as one of its leaders.

These independent and non-partisan artists were non-conformists and did not get any support from the authorities. In order to survive, they had to make their living as they could, they were unable to demonstrate officially their works or sell them. Even buying colors, paints and materials for painting and drawing was a problem for them, as colors, paints and materials were sold to Union of Artists' members only. In fact, these artists were covertly declared "outlaws" and were the most disenfranchised, persecuted and miserable part of the artistic society.

Their art started simultaneously in the early 1970s. These artists created distinctive and unique art and later became world renown. These artists shared one common thing: their art and oeuvre were influenced by the art of the legendary Ülo Sooster, Estonian artist, metaphysicist and surrealist, Gulag prisoner and notorious bohemian, who argued with Nikita Khruschev about lunar landscapes. His is often named as the father of the Russian neo-avant-garde. His influence on the development of the independent Russian visual culture was enormous.

Ülo Sooster was born on 17 October 1924 on the Isle of Hiiumaa in Estonia. Sooster descended from the family of well-to-do Estonian peasant proprietors. As his wife wrote later, "the male line in the family was not very keen in farming. They were, if I may say, more lyrists than ploughers". His grandfather was a baptist pastor and made at the same time musical instruments, Grandfather's brother translated the New Testament into Estonian. The father acted as a choir precenter. And the young Ülo (at the farm yard) produced linoleum engravings and learnt languages.

From the very childhood he drew and painted, and later polished his artistry at the Pallas Higher Arts School in Tartu (later re-named into the Tartu Arts Institute). Most of the school professors studied in Europe at the times of the surrealist revolution, they were open-minded, with Western manners and morals. When Estonia was occupied by the Soviet troops, Sooster had to participate (although on the German side) but very briefly, and then he deserted.

In 1949, Ülo Sooster graduated from the Tartu Arts Institute. As one of three best students he was entitled to travel for traineeship to Paris, Berlin, or Rome. But in the then-Soviet Estonia nothing of this kind was allowed. They attempted to demand their foreign traineeship, but later that year he was arrested and sentenced under Article 58 (political) for 10 years in prison. Also, the standard accusation included the wording "decadent dissidence".

He served long prison terms in Dolinka near Karaganda (Kazakhstan), notorious for its harsh and brutal conditions even in the Gulag system. Gulag nightmare visions scarred the artist' soul, but he continued to draw even in the camp. His drawings, mainly of his jail mates, reveal academic training, but not of the Russian school. Their impressionist forms reminded neoclassical Picasso, and sometimes Max Beckmann. Even his realism displayed in portraits of convicts, often commissioned for 5 roubles a piece, was not Russian or Itinerants-like, heartbreaking, but rather German, unemotional and objectivist, following Adolf Menzel. These drawings,

which survived torn and burnt, belong to the most interesting exhibits by the Memorial Center (Moscow).

Ülo Sooster considered the prison as his second University, where he served his terms with the elite intellectuals collected from the entire empire, as artist Tõnis Vint recollected later. After all these Dante's circles of hell, he brought out his belief that there was only one possible way in arts – to turn your face toward the life, cruel, dark and irrational. His friend and disciple Ilya Kabakov defined the artist's position very precisely: "a volcanologist who stares straight into the crater".

He spent seven years out of the forty-six years of life given to him. At the camp he learnt how to speak Russian and met his future wife Lidiya Serkh, who, after his death, published her memoirs generously illustrated with her husband's works.

In the mid-1950s, Ülo Sooster was rehabilitated and freed. In 1956, he attempted to return to Estonia, but it became another country. He failed to find a job there; the Union of Artists in Tallinn refused to admit him as he "distorts the image of Soviet people". That is why in 1957, he went to Moscow where there was some flickering of non-official artistic life.

The Moscow Thaw quickly defined his place in the circle of like-minded fellows. As the famous Ilya Kabakov wrote in his memoirs, their world was divided into "them" and "us", ("they" – authorities, employers, house managers – were perceived as another, hostile and dangerous species living "above" in the official, another world, whereas beneath it, closely connected with each other, loving and respecting each other, as if "under the floor of life", there is another fellowship, a very special tribe of people. Namely, this climate of fraternity was so characteristic for the life of these artists, poets, jazz men, and authors, who happened, by lucky chance, to meet each other within the same Moscow stratum at this time". During the initial stage of his life in Moscow, one can say, Sooster was quite a successful artist. He illustrated books, among them – "In the Summer Heat", "Spot on the Earth", "The Glass River" by B.A. Dizhur (Ernst Neizvestny's mother), jointly with R. Minna (1958) - "Little Illimar" by F. Tuglas. In 1959-1962, he participated in several exhibitions. It was the time of his first successes and first recognition. His spirit of the artistic quest fitted into a certain system of

metaphors, which unexpectedly happened to be keen to the new time mindset. The Moscow exhibits drew crowds of visitors.

But it did not last long, only till the crackdown of the Manezh Exhibit in 1962, after which Ülo Sooster became a prominent figure of the non-conformist art and facilitated to form it as a movement – Sretenskiy Boulevard Group artists.

They were known as Sretentsy, Sretenskiy group, and Sretenskiy Boulevard Group artists, and in fact were a community of very diverse artists-modernists. There were united not only by their geographical location (many of them had their workshops within the Sretenskiy Boulevard neighborhood, but mainly because they shared the same views on the philosophy of arts.

Ülo Sooster was the most flamboyant figure in the then-Moscow. The first, commonest line in his biography sounded in the 1960s for a dissidence-tuned Russian like an outlandish music: "Ülo-Ilmar Jogannesovich Sooster, painter and graphic artist, was born in 1924 at the Isle of Hiiumaa, at the Village of Yukhtri of the Kyanasky district, at the farm Pendi". He looked like a foreigner, Hemingway-like – vigorous, tall, strongly built, with a neat skipper's beard, and an inevitable pipe in his mouth. He spoke with a typical Baltic accent, astounding Moscovites with his philosophical mind and fluent command of foreign languages, what was very rare at that time. Moscow artists borrowed his creative experimentalism and philosophical approach. In short, he was a strange person with a colossal internal freedom.

His strength of fortitude and captivating charm, fate full of dramatic twists and excellent education he acquired in the "western", independent by the Soviet standards, Republic of Estonia, combined with his talent and creative obsession, helped him quickly establish himself as an authority in the underground. Very soon he became their ideological leader, authority among the authorities: Yury Sobolev-Nolev and Ilya Kabakov, upon whose words everybody hung upon, in their turn, hung on words of this artist who spoke ragged Russian. His accent was half Estonian/half Georgian, as he learnt the Russian language from the prisoners who originated from the Caucasus mountain area.

Ülo Sooster's apartment turned into one of the most important scenes where unofficial artists, who did not fit into the ideological limits enforced by the

Soviet regime, used to socialize. In the 1960s, he hosted meetings in his apartment every Tuesday. Western reporters and journalists played a critical role in this community as they tried to bring attention to the existence of "another" trend in Russian arts and without their efforts it would have remained unknown. Thus, the Italian author Antonelli Trombadore even arranged an exhibition, consisting only of underground works by Ilya Kabakov, Ülo Sooster, Ernst Neizvestny, Anatoly Brusilovsky, and Yuriy Sobolev.

"I felt absolutely groovy when I listened to him talking. We all adored him. His impact and charm of his personality were so powerful, that we often tried to imitate him when he was absent. Even his accent", – says Anatoly Brusilovsky.

Everybody who had met him recollected him with exceptional warmth. Even spiteful Ilya Kabakov, who hated his own Soviet past, dedicated his teacher a book where he attempts to analyze Ülo Sooster's works with a true passion of an arts critic (Ilya Kabakov. About Ülo Sooster's pictures. Subjective notes). And in his memoirs "The 1960s-1970s... Notes about the Unofficial Life in Moscow) he devoted several pages to Ülo Sooster, where he writes only cordial words about him, whereas he reduced to dust all his other friends.

All the artists at one stage or another followed Sooster, who attempted to squeeze the entire universe into one discrete picture. The whole Sooster's macrocosm and microcosm fitted in two major motives roaming from one picture to another – the Universal Egg soaring in the air as the beginning of all beginnings, and juniper shrubs reminding of his native island of Hiiumaa.

At the same time, the "otherness" of Ülo Sooster was devoid of scandal political coloring: it was organic for him. Only once, after the incident with Kruschev he drew an explicitly dissident drawing – caricature on the Politburo (Political Bureau of the Communist Party) members depicting them as funny and detestable fish. The rest in his art is pure, metaphysical, and mysterious.

As Ilya Kabakov wrote, that time was characteristic of cultural isolation: "...the 1960s were the years of ignorance in the strictest sense of the word, the years of leaden, lingering slumber in the country severed from any cultural tradition. As its inevitable consequence, the atmosphere of the quiet, almost idiotic ignorance was almost dignified in the 1960s. A huge number of artists and painters who did not know (anything), did not read, did not see (anything) came to the stage. And this "lack of knowledge" was a unique

provision for their creativity, they themselves appreciated only what they invented, figured out themselves". In this regard, Ülo Sooster differed noticeably. He possessed extensive knowledge of the global context and perceived arts as incorporated into this context. As mentioned earlier, Sooster had been educated by teachers who belonged to the European school, and Ülo Sooster was well aware of how, roughly speaking, impressionism was different from cubism, what was bad about bourgeois pointillism, and why the new aesthetics, "dynamic statics" should be invented. One should not forget that unlike other artists, Ülo Sooster had been directly influenced by the European arts. Having acquired some knowledge about the contemporary European arts in the relatively free post-war Estonia, he inoculated surrealist sprouts in the Moscow art.

In the 1960s, he created the ironic "Club of Surrealists", where future conceptualists, like Ilya Kabakov and Viktor Pivovarov, matured.

In the then-Moscow nobody had a clue about surrealism, except Ülo Sooster, who knew everything. His command of languages was conducive to this, too. He procured, by hook or by crook, foreign magazines on arts, and looked for his own path in surrealism. At some stage he overgrew surrealism, submerging into the metaphysics of arts. It was not the area of subconscious fantasies, but rather an attempt to embrace the world as the whole through thinking. The artists attempted to find out in each object its universal properties and elevate the life of each character in their works to the cosmic level.

Behind Ülo Sooster's graphic compositions, there was hidden a whole strata of events and emotions of human souls. This new approach to artistic work hugely influenced artists of unofficial arts, opening new ways for them. Ülo Sooster was named a Moscow Picasso who opened to his closest friends a new form of the existence of arts, new laws of the Being and new ways of expression. On the small island which they imagined with artist Yury Sobolev, they searched for the "lost time", studying the history of arts. Looking through magazines and publications, they restored the "lost chain", principles of deformation in cubism and impressionism, spatial inventions by Picasso and Braque, De Chirico, methods of abstracting by Mondrian and Pollock, surrealistic approach by Max Ernst and Renè Magritte, poetics of Klee and Miro.

The analysis of Sooster's works demonstrates that although isolated from the western tradition, he miraculously continued to develop within its course. He focused on three subjects – egg, fish, and juniper – and endlessly varying them, he built his own metaphysical model of the universe. And this

surrealistic organics had nothing to do with the Russian avant-garde, Pavel Filonov, and Mikhail Matyushin. He was closer to Paul Klee, Max Ernst or Wols. So, when in 1962, the Communist party arts critics pointed to N. Khruschev that Ülo Sooster's alien landscapes and metaphysical eggs were deeply anti-Soviet, essentially they were quite right.

In 1960, Sooster attempted, unsuccessfully, to join the USSR Union of Artists. And in 1962, as mentioned earlier, his paintings happened to be part of the Manezh historical exhibit of the Avant-Garde dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the Moscow branch of the Union of Artists and organized by Elia Belyutin, one of the leaders of the Soviet unofficial arts. Nikita Khruschev, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, was invited to the opening. He was especially furious at the arts by Ülo Sooster, V. Yankilevsky, and B. Zhutovsky.

Ülo's wife Lidiya Sooster recollected: "Ülo was asked about one of the paintings: "What's this?" When he was agitated, his accent became stronger. He said: "This is a lunar landscape". Khruschev voiced his displeasure: "Have you ever been there?", and he started yelling: "I shall expel you out of the country, I shall send you to the camp". Ülo answered: "I have already been there…"

Khruschev was unpleasantly nonplussed that, unlike the Moon, Ülo Sooster had been in the camp. So, the First Secretary criticized the abstract arts, ordered to close the exhibit, and prohibit the activity of several artists, including Ülo Sooster. The same day over 200m works of the Novaya Realnost" (New Reality) Studio artists, were arrested and confiscated.

As the follow-up of the exhibit, the next day, the Pravda newspaper published a smashing review which launched the campaign against formalism and abstractionism in the USSR. N. Khruschev called for the expulsion of the artists-exhibit participants from the Communist party and from the Union of Artists, but it turned out that in fact nobody of them was a member of these bodies. In two weeks when the USSR leadership met with representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia, N. Khruschev reported: "These artists were educated on the people's money, they eat people's bread, and for whom do they work, if the people do not understand them?!".

As per the theatrical critic Grigory Zaslavsky, this exhibit signified the end of the Thaw and the beginning of the subsequent stagnation.

Ülo Sooster understood that any official artistic carrier in the USSR was out of the question for him. The disgraced artists were not arrested, but for a couple of years they struggled in finding any job. It was difficult to find any

work in publishing houses, and Ülo had to work under the assumed name of Yu. Smorodin. And before his death he faced another blow: the animation movie "Glass Harmonics" by Andrey Khrzhanovsky, where Ülo Sooster worked as the artistic director, was banned for screening and shelved for twenty years. The timing coincided with the suppression of the "Velvet revolution" in Czechoslovakia, and any freethinking in arts was prohibited. This last event stripped him of any illusions to deal with the authorities. He started articulating openly his willingness to emigrate.

Another citation from Lidiya Sooster's memoirs: "Ülo never understood how arts can be programmed by the authorities. He was absolutely free, and he thought that he was trapped in a cage with no way out. Only shortly before his death, some quietness came to him; he said it did not matter where to work, whereas one can work. But initially it was awful for him".

In spite of the persecutions, in 1962 the artist managed to participate in exhibitions held in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Spain.

In 1963, Ülo Sooster met physicist Viktor Trostnikov, with whom he started illustrating the book "Physics: Remote and Close". Boris Zhutovsky recollected that "physicists were in general a privileged social class. The authorities did not touch them, as they were responsible for the defense. And they could think about the Universe whatever they want, talk in their own "bird's language and meet foreigners. It is noteworthy that often artists/book illustrators quickly gained intellectual potentiality due to popular scientific books. And while in the camp, Ülo made friends with an academician with whom he engaged in lengthy conversations". He often said that in another life he could be a physicist. The artist believed in life on other planets, he was intensely interested in science, and read books about cybernetics. Viktor Trostnikov highly praises Ülo's outstanding capabilities in physics and mathematics. This cooperation gave birth to free compositions with Sooster's images on physics in his surrealistic adaptation. Part of this significant collection is exhibited in the KUMU Arts Museum (Tallinn) as a permanent exhibit devoted to the Soviet arts period.

Ülo's love to science fiction was obvious. He also illustrated books by R. Bradbury, C. Simac, G. Kuttner, A. Azimov, S. Gansovsky, and other science fiction authors, and created several popular scientific films. His bright metaphoric illustrations appeared for several years on the pages of the Znaniye-Sila (Knowledge is Power) journal.

Below are some interesting recollections by prominent Russian writers and artists about Ülo Sooster, showing his personal traits.

Eduard Limonov, famous author: "Sooster and Kabakov appeared to me quite young and strong guys. They were already renowned in their professional sphere, as they were especially remarkable as artists-illustrators who gravitated around the Znaniye-Sila (Knowledge is Power) journal. Sooster was also successful as an animation artist.

Ülo Sooster was about 40 year old, no more. Unfortunately, he suddenly passed away in 1969. However, he did enough to become the most prominent Estonian artist of the new time. And in the 1960s, Ülo (a small Scandinavian beard, a pipe, his unforgettable "normalno" (ok in Russian), diabolically charming, attempted to help me place my poems somewhere.... I shall mention only that I was his friend, or to be more precise, I buddied up with him, we loved to fuddle ourselves with red wine in his workshop."

Viktor Pivovarov, artist: "It is amazing to what extent even integral men can consist of opposites! When several years ago, I happened to be in Ülo Sooster's workshop, the first thing I was shocked with – it was unimaginable, fantastic clutter. The whole room was overwhelmed with piles of cigarette stubs, emptied tubes, folders stuffed with drawings, canvases, books. But as soon as the artist started showing his works, I saw another facet of the medal, another opposite quality of this person: iron logics, strictest rhythmical order, expressed extremely simply and powerfully, like a bell toll".

Two opposites get together in Sooster, too: on one hand, extremely strong subconscious impulse associated with his childhood memories. These are very sensuous impressions of bristy ornament of junipers, ovality of seashore stones, endless recurrences of sea waves, and warm plays of fish schools.

On the other hand, there is no spontaneity, no surprise, no admiration in his outlook at the Nature. It is more like a searching look of a scientist striving to pierce into the mystery of things. The artist looks for some ideal formula in the Nature, its centricity, formula as accomplished and sophisticated as the egg's form.

As another artist – A.R. Brusilovsky, recollected: "Ülo frequently changed his workshops – usually dreadful, scantily lit basements or rental rooms in slums. How he worked was amazing; he experimented with forms and colors, and his works covered the entire space in his shabby dog-hole. His hands were always moving, if they were busy, he tapped his feet. He exuded the noise of creativity".

In 1969, Sooster worked as an artistic director for the cartoon named "Be ware of wolves!" by film director Ye. Hamburg, he illustrated "The Frozen Book' by Yu. Smuul, and made illustrations to his favorite childhood book "Spring" by Oscar Lutz. His popularity and the number of commissions grew.

Ülo Sooster was a zealous person, perceiving painting as the way to comprehend the universe. He wanted to taste and feel everything. He "burnt out" quickly.

On 25 Obctober 1970, he was only 47, when he died in his workshop (stroke, coronary insufficiency). There was an obituary in the Decorative Arts magazine. Ülo's family handed over his works to the Tartu Museum, where his first solo exhibition opened on 10 April 1971.

In 1972, he was re-buried at the Metsakalmistu (Forest Cemetery) in Tallinn, where lay all prominent peoples of Estonia.

His last illustrations in the book Spring received the first award at the 1972 All-Union competition.

Ülo Sooster's art is philosophical. The unique style of artist's works is close to surrealistic. In the graphics and paintings of the mature artist, the Universe magically freezes and fills from inside with mysterious, formidable power. The repetitive motives of the Estonian nature and texture of stones and plants reproduced in his works look like extraterrestrial curiosities brought by aliens.

Ülo Sooster painted eggs, fish and junipers (he was born at the Isle of Hiiumaa which was home to abundant juniper shrubs). But his works are more than paintings. They are symbols or metaphors. As his eggs, or fish, or junipers are oval (considered an ideal shape), at their essence they are all eggs. Therefore, one can say that the topic of life in his art is the Absolute itself. Ilya Kabakov thought that the symbolic images of the egg, fish and juniper were "the most essential metaphors, photo elements of life and drama of the Being through which he could depict universal and mystic properties of the entire cosmos".

The images of his favorite shapes, along with the eggs, fish and junipers, as well as eyes made in the 1960s, are considered his best ones.

Ülo Sooster produced the whole series of landscapes with junipers. Junipers are spiny, ever-green shrubs. The herby, resinous scent of their fruits reminded of the meadows and forests in his native land.

Ilya Kabakov: "Looking through all the trees depicted by Ülo, one can see that almost all of them trace back to this image of juniper, that all numerous shapes of the flora this way or another are essentially modified junipers which grow across every valley and on every hill. But contrary to the fish and eggs, they are never depicted alone. Typically, on the picture there are three, four, five of them separated by an even distance in-between.

The symbol of the egg shines through the symbol of Ülo's tree, one image overlaps another, the meaning of one superimposes another, applying its own meaning.

But unlike the egg, Ülo's tree has more earthly, natural properties, than cosmic. They refer to our earthly being, shapes of the nature among which we live on this Earth. In this sense, while Ülo's egg soars and levitates above the ground, his junipers are firmly planted on the ground, connected to the surface, rooted into it."

"The entire art of Ülo is fundamentally mythological, it contains the myth in itself, it is wholly and essentially the single mythologeme", writes Ilya Kabakov in his book about Ülo Sooster.

"First of all, it is the myth about cosmos, Universe, its integral state; it is the myth about the minimal and maximal, micro- and macrocosm, and their interaction.

It is the myth about its tiniest particle, containing the entire cosmos, and the cosmos which may be represented as the particle.

It is the myth about the Universe as the single pulsating body, filled with energy, Being.

It is the myth about self-generating life, which is its own basis, the myth about pan-sexuality.

It is the myth about the cosmos, absolutely not anthropocentric, where the Man is not central, the myth about the Man who does not stand out of the common world.

It is the myth about the world which does not know its own primal cause and does not need it for its existence."

Ülo rejected outright the idea of the first movement of the Universe from outside, thinking that the first movement/first impulse was located inside the nature; it was one of the moments of its life, its Bang, probably, due to its reaction with the antimatter".

Ab ovo. One of Sooster's favorite objects is the egg, as the most important archetypical symbol of life and birth. When asked about what he was doing, he answered: "Now I am busy with eggs. The egg is a symbol of life. The egg is a symbol of birth". He painted fish, eggs shining through, eyes inside the eggs, and "quartered" eggs with sterile emptiness inside. Ülo Sooster was excited especially by the mystic component: what was hidden under the egg shell, what would the embryo, which develop there, bring to the world? He depicted colossal eggs against the neutral landscape, painting them into different colors, gluing diverse pieces of cardboard, feathers, glass. He painted eggs numerous times: laying on the sea bottom or sands, soaring in the fantastic space, changing colors and texture of its surface, turning into a fish or an unhatched chick.

Ilya Kabakov wrote that it was not difficult to guess that the main meaning for this image was the meaning of what was happening inside the origin, bearing the birth inside.

Thanks to these figurative solutions we are encompassed by the grandiosity of what is happening, its universality and cosmic nature. In his paintings, eggs are hundred kilometers high, lying on the earth, many times exceeding the height of its mountains and structures, ultimately turning into the principium of the entire life on the earth.

The other metaphors of the artist include the image of a woman, a human head with its components (eye, nose, lips, ear), and the motive of a window. Some of these symbols can be identified in abstract drawings, too.

The fish, eggs, tree are jointly archetypes of the pagan-Christian culture. The repertoire of the motives is scarce, the suspense of the works lies in their composition and color variety, many-layered texture, heavy painting. That is why Ülo Sooster may be considered an archaic formalist.

But many argued that he was a true surrealist, who created with pure freedom, not affordable for the Moscow art underground, which was socially discomforted and frustrated by its proximity to the metropolitan authorities. The art of Sooster who had grasped some free artistic education in the post-war Estonia exemplified the liberated psychological experiment – his own and viewer's. In fact, it was what classical surrealists of the 1920s-1930s focused at, but in the Russian art there was no surrealism prior Ülo Sooster, that is why his exercises in the 1960s were so important.

This art, full of philosophical paradoxes, pictorially turning things into immaterial poetic ideas, became one of the thresholds of the Moscow conceptualism, particularly influencing Ilya Kabakov's art.

Looking at such artistic styles, like realism, impressionism, cubism, constructivism, metaphysical painting, and abstractionism, Ülo Sooster analyzed them in his own way. The non-conformist artist paid attention to the texture of his works. He attempted to achieve the relief effect using various materials, starting with thick paints and ending with pieces of glass. Sooster often used red and blue colors, as well as grey, which is the combination of white and black.

Following the same surrealists with their techniques of automatic writing and narcotic painting, Ülo Sooster frequently indulged in dropping ink or water color on paper, and then transforming them into narrative sketches or exquisite abstract compositions. That is where reasoning fought with physiology, the brain with his hand, conscious with subconscious. In his drawings and paintings Ülo Sooster was unconstrained; numerous new crazy ideas and images emerged this way.

It is difficult to assign Sooster to a certain style in the arts.

The helm of the master is inherited by his only son Tenno Sooster. He lives in Israel, but his works fall out significantly out of the context of the contemporary Israeli arts. He is closer to his father's peers: Ilya Kabakov, Boris Zhutovsky, Vladimir Yankilevsky, Viktor Pivovarov, Eduard Shteinerg, to those who started during the so-called Thaw and laid the foundation of the Moscow conceptualism. Tenno Sooster says: "As a child I was constantly boiling in the same environment. And it appears, it has become the basis of my own art. Everybody says I grew out of that time. I feel the same. My works are based on what was laid down at that time".

During the artist's lifetime, only one article about Ülo Sooster's arts was published by V. Pivovarov in the Detskaya Literatura (Children's Literature) journal in February 1968.

Andrey Khrzhanovsky created one of his most significant projects – film named "Ülo Sooster", consisting of two parts: "The Landscape with the Juniper" and "The School of Fine Arts".

In this project the film-maker reviews Ülo Sooster' artistic career as a model of the new art inception, describing the Khruschev's Thaw time in the late 1950s-early 1960s.

The most renowned representative of the Russian avant-garde Ilya Kabakov called Ülo Sooster as his teacher and dedicated his several projects to Ülo. Among them, he published his monograph "About Ülo Sooster's paintings. Subjective Notes" in 1996.

Ülo Sooster's wife published her memoirs "My Sooster" (2000) and "I am from Krasin Street" (2009).

During his lifetime before the Manezh exhibit was crushed, Ülo Sooster began to exhibit his works abroad (Poland, Italy, West Germany, etc).

Currently Ülo Sooster's works reside in museums and private collections, including the Tretyakov's Gallery, Moscow Museum of Contemporary Arts, Estonian Museum of Fine Arts (Tallinn), Tartu Museum of Arts, Zimmerli Art Museum (New Jersey, U.S.A.), as well as museums in Prague and Stockholm.

For very long the master remained a fable for Moscow spectators. The first solo exhibition by Ülo Sooster took place posthumously in 1970 in Tartu, where he graduated from the Arts Institute, and only in 1979, his art was extensively displayed by the Municipal Committee of Graphic Artists (Malaya Gruzinskaya Str, Moscow). This Ülo Sooster's memorial, fullest exhibit lasted one month.

On 6 March 1985, Ülo Sooster's exhibit opened at the State Arts Museum in Kadriorg (Tallinn), and a little later, on 29 March 1985, his exhibit started in the Tartu Arts Museum.

In 1990, five drawings made by Ülo while in the concentration camp were displayed at the exhibit named "Arts in Camps and Exiles – GULAG – Art" hosted by the Memorial Society and the Moscow organization of the Union of Artists.

In the early 1990s, the works by Ülo Sooster and Ilya Kabakov were shown at the exhibit "Illustration as Means for Survival" in Kortrijk, Belgium.

During the period 20 December 1996 through 19 January 1997, Ülo Sooster's works were displayed at the Tallinn House of Arts, with a catalogue published.

In 2001, the State Arts Museum (Moscow) provided its premises for a huge display devoted to his art.

In 2002, the Estonian Arts Museum held a retrospective exhibition of painter's works.

In 2008, the Gallery of Arts by Zurab Tsereteli hosted an exhibit "Paradise Is Not Lost" dedicated to the contemporary art of Estonia during the Days of Culture of Tallinn in Moscow. They displayed portraits by Ülo Sooster, as well as his sci-fi works.

On 10 February 2010, the State Literary Museum opened the exhibit "Ülo Sooster: Painting, Graphics, Book Illustration".

In February 2014, the display of works by Ülo attracted spectators to the Mytischi Historical-and-Arts Museum in the Moscow Region. It was devoted to the artist's 90th anniversary and lasted 2 weeks.

In 2015 a series of events was prepared to commemorate Ülo Sooster's anniversary. In particular, Kumu Art Museum opened an exhibit under the working title "Ülo Sooster and Tartu Circle".

Very recently, in October 2020, the movie by Liliya Vyugina was aired in State Tretyakov Gallery and Kumu Art Museum. The movie called – "Ülo Sooster. The Man Who Dried A Towel In The Wind", it commemorates the life and art of Ülo Sooster, in depth with many interesting insights on his personality.

It is generally recognized that the Russian non-conformist art of the 1960s is infinitely indebted to Ülo Sooster, a native of the Isle of Hiiumaa, Estonia. For Russians Ülo Sooster shall always remain as the leader of the protesting underground, whereas for Estonia as a naïve surrealist who made a philosophical symbol out of a simple juniper. "It seems that not only Sooster's art but his entire personality has become an integral part of a powerful mythology, which still remains so vividly in the minds of the people who were touched by his presence" (Eda Sepp, Estonian Non-Conformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika, p. 48.). For everybody Ülo Sooster is the example of artist's stoicism and independence, what is hard to be followed even nowadays.

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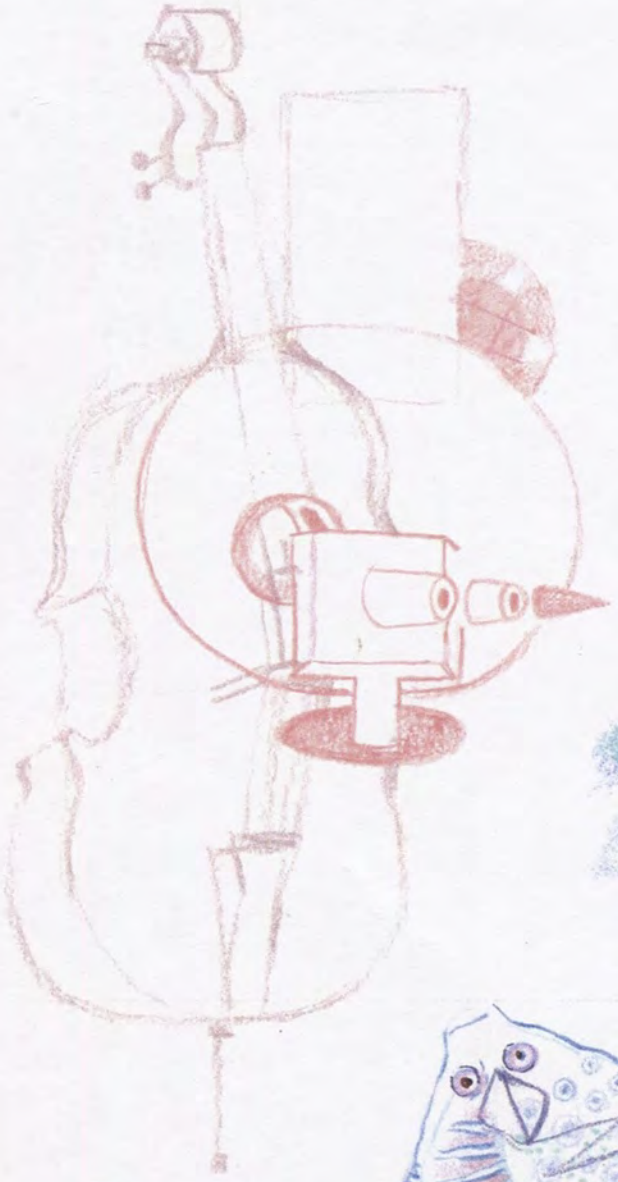

The Music of Silence Maestro

The man who was Born free
But was forced to live caged

Mees, Kes Kuivatas Räticut
tuule Käes

Hiiumaa