

An Egg through the Window: Rediscovering Ülo Sooster in the National Gallery Prague

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***Window*, a little-known surrealist painting in the collection of the National Gallery Prague, was created by Soviet-Estonian artist Ülo Sooster in the mid-1960s. While taking the form of a *trompe l'oeil* window, the author argues that the work can also be read as a metaphorical view onto the nonconformist art scene in Moscow in the early Cold War. This essay takes a detailed look through the layers of paint to explore the life of the artist: from his youth in Tartu, followed by his imprisonment in the Gulag, to his later confrontation with Khrushchev at the height of the “Thaw”. It also brings together archival material, personal recollections and correspondence with other national museums to reveal the mystery of how and why *Window* found its home in Prague.**

Keywords

Ülo Sooster, painting, Soviet art, Estonian art, dissident art, Moscow nonconformism, surrealism, abstraction, socialist realism

I remember being struck by the romantic life story of Ülo Sooster when I first heard of it. The charismatic painter, transported to Moscow from his native Estonia, a survivor of the infamous Gulag, a leading member of the nonconformist art movement, dead at merely forty-six years of age. So the sight of Sooster's name on a list of paintings in the National Gallery Prague – as I familiarised myself with the collection after joining as curator of modern and contemporary art – immediately piqued my interest. Keen to discover more about his painting and its journey to Prague, I began my investigation. Along the way, I would discover an artist even more intriguing than I had realised, and a neglected work that holds in its mysterious layers the turbulent tale of art in communist-era Europe.

Window was painted by Sooster in 1964, as evidenced by the date and his distinctive looping signature in bright red paint in the bottom right-hand corner of the cardboard rectangle. (Fig. 1) When viewing this medium-sized oil painting on the racks in the depository at the Trade Fair Palace, the first thing that caught my attention was the gleaming egg at its centre. The egg was the



1 Ülo Sooster, *Window [Okno]*, 1964. Oil on cardboard, 50 × 70.5 cm. National Gallery Prague.

main recurring motif in Sooster's work from the late 1950s onwards, and here was the National Gallery's own version, resplendent in bright white, appearing to shine like an oval sun into the subterranean storage room. In Sooster's window, the egg/sun fusion is enhanced by its setting against the background of a blue sky. This at once reminded me of his passion for surrealism, as well as evoking the sky that so often symbolised a utopian future in the paintings of socialist realism, the official art style that dominated creative production in the USSR throughout Sooster's adult life. The *trompe l'oeil* effect of the window, a favourite of Sooster and further testament to his reputation as "the first Moscow surrealist of the '60s",¹ was also striking on first sight, drawing me in and as if inviting me to delve further into the riddle how this egg came to find its home in the Czech Republic.

Having removed the frame from the vertical rack and laid it flat, other alluring aspects of the painting leapt out at me. The construction of the window from overlapping rectangles appears to owe a debt to the geometric abstraction of Dutch pioneer, Piet Mondrian. But instead of Mondrian's preference for primary colours, Sooster has chosen a far more muted palette. What at a distance mingles into a muddy grey, on closer inspection separates out into a rich web of colour, ranging



2 Ülo Sooster, detail of *Window*.

3 Ülo Sooster, *Fear [Hirm]*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 34 × 21 cm. Tartu Art Museum.



from oak green and aubergine purple, to baby pink, piercing yellow and sharp white. The egg itself is also revealed to hold unexpected colour, with the blanched shell intersected by delicate strands of red, giving the impression of pulsating veins that hint at life within. (Fig. 2) The surface is also disrupted by the indentation of fingerprints, presumably those of Sooster himself. As well as evoking the presence of the artist, this mottled effect suggests that this egg might crack at any moment – a sudden sign of menace against the idyllic blue sky.

This juxtaposition of joy and fear defined Sooster's own life as much as his art. His tragically early death marked the end of a tempestuous, adventurous and quintessentially "bohemian" existence. Ülo Sooster was born in 1924 on the island of Hiiumaa in the Baltic Sea, during a brief period of Estonian independence. In a convoluted history that is so common in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the Second World War, Estonia was annexed by the USSR in August 1940, becoming the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, before being occupied by Nazi Germany the following summer. After being "liberated" by Soviet troops in 1944, the Estonian SSR became one of the jewels of the "voluntary union", and would remain so until it could reclaim independence and be rechristened as the Republic of Estonia in 1991. Despite the turmoil of the war years, during which he was briefly forced to work as a paramedic in the German army (a fact he managed to keep hidden after the return of Soviet rule), Sooster began training as a painter and illustrator at the Higher Art School Pallas in Tartu. But before long, he would become one of the victims of Stalin's resurgent paranoia after the end of what was known in the USSR as the Great Patriotic War.



4 Ülo Sooster, *Self-Portrait with Prison Camp Background [Autoportree vangilaagri taustal]*, 1958. Oil on cardboard, 34 × 49.7 cm. Tartu Art Museum.

5 Ülo Sooster and Ilya Kabakov in their studio, Moscow, 1960s. Photographer unknown. Tartu Art Museum.



The Soviet authorities had already eliminated all independent artist groups in the Baltics in 1940, as part of an aggressive purge of the intelligentsia. After reoccupation, a ruthless process of Sovietisation attempted to impose Stalinist ideology on all areas of life in the so-called "Soviet West". Socialist realism was introduced as the only acceptable form of art, and adherence was enforced by local branches of the Artists' Union. Less a monolithic artistic style than an ideological concept that encompassed all cultural production, the tenets of socialist realism required that artists produce didactic works, clearly accessible to the proletariat, that encouraged



6 René Magritte, *Variation of Sadness [Variante de la tristesse]*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm. Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth. © René Magritte, OOA-S 2019.

them to labour for the achievement of communism. Since Tartu had been the centre of Estonian artistic life from the early twentieth century, when its artists were strongly influenced by the School of Paris, the city's creative community came under particular suspicion. Individuals were compelled to publicly denounce their modernist past and pledge commitment to the new artistic doctrine, while the art school in Tartu was steadily taken over by teachers and students sent from Russia, as well as incognito KGB officers. Already in 1945, two of Sooster's classmates, Varmo Pirk and Herman Aunapuu, were sent to the Gulag, the notorious network of prison camps that dotted some of the most inhospitable terrain in the Soviet Union. As the persecution of Estonian intellectuals intensified in 1948, Sooster and five of his fellow art students were put under observation by the secret police. The following year, the group was arrested, charged with participation in various farfetched anti-Soviet activities, and sentenced to ten years of hard labour.²

Transported to distant Kazakhstan, Sooster would spend the next six years in the coal mining complex of Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp. Also incarcerated in "KarLag", British woman Flora Leipman later recounted that the camp's population of slave labourers were "dying like flies".³ Despite this suffering, Sooster found unexpected camaraderie and inspiration in his remote confinement, referring to it as his "second university".⁴ Having studied at the French lycée in Tartu, Sooster was able to converse with Russian scientists and philosophers who had received their education in Western Europe, spurring his lifelong intellectual curiosity. It was also among his fellow inmates that Sooster met his future wife, Lidia Serh, a Jewish-Russian stage designer who had been imprisoned as a suspected American spy. In 1954, Sooster was appointed the prison camp artist, once again giving him access to art materials. Prior to his arrest, his paintings are mainly impressionist in style, with clear references to the landscapes and portraits of Monet, Cézanne and Van Gogh. Yet, ironically, it was in the Gulag that Sooster found



7 Demonstration of action painting by Harry Colman, Moscow, 1957. Photograph by Lola Liivat. Courtesy Lola Liivat and Kädi Talvoja.



8 Crowds viewing *Cathedral* by Jackson Pollock at the American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959. Photograph by F. Goess. Downtown Gallery records, 1824–1974, bulk 1926–1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the freedom to develop his own creative style. Over the remaining two years of his incarceration, he created a series of self-portraits in an increasingly expressionist style, depicting himself in his blue prison overalls and often wearing a cap or holding a pipe. Mostly Sooster portrayed himself with a forlorn expression but, on the occasion of his thirtieth birthday, he broke with this pattern to paint himself grimacing at the viewer with his mouth agape, titling the painting *Fear (Hirm)*. (Fig. 3)

Against the odds, Sooster survived his internment and was released in March 1956, as part of the process of de-Stalinisation after the death of the dictator three years earlier. Sooster's experiences in KarLag would, however, haunt him for the rest of his life, with scenes of prison life recurring in his work. (Fig. 4) Moreover, Sooster's homecoming in Estonia would be shortlived. Prevented from joining the Artists' Union and unable to find work, he

instead turned to the hometown of his new wife. The Soosters arrived in Moscow in October 1956, at a time of profound change in the city's artistic life. That same month, impressionist and post-impressionist paintings, confined to museum basements for the past decade, went back on display; while the opening of a retrospective of Pablo Picasso at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts was a landmark moment during the period known as "Khrushchev's Thaw". Earlier in 1956, the return of the USSR to participation in the Venice Biennale, after a twenty-two year hiatus, was yet another sign of the tentative liberalisation of Soviet society under new leader, Nikita Khrushchev.

Despite speaking broken Russian, Sooster quickly found himself at the centre of Moscow's burgeoning dissident art scene. Along with new friends including Ilya Kabakov, Viktor Pivovarov and Erik Bulatov, he would establish a career as an illustrator of children's and popular science books and cartoon films. This enabled him to join the Artists' Union and to gain access to art materials that he could use for his own clandestine creative projects. From 1960, Sooster shared a studio with Kabakov on the now-famous Sretensky Boulevard. (Fig. 5) The street gave its name to the group of nonconformist artists who worked there, many of whom had trained in the studio of Eli Beliutin. Founded in 1948, Beliutin's private art school, *New Reality (Novaya real'nost')*, became a centre for young artists who rejected the demands of socialist realism, such as Pivovarov, Vladimir Yankilevsky, Ernst Neizvestny and Boris Zhutovsky. The Sretensky Boulevard Group was also closely aligned with the Lianozovo Group, likewise formed in the mid-1950s by artists who shared a commitment to experimentation, rather than a common style. At the same time, Sooster's basement apartment became a meeting space and artistic salon for nonconformist artists.

While settling in Moscow, Sooster read voraciously and his knowledge of Western art was expanded by books sent from an aunt living in Sweden. In particular, he was drawn to the surrealists, whose work he was aware of from his time as an art student in Tartu. According to art historian Eha Komissarov, "Sooster was fascinated with the playfulness of the surreal manner of narration, and with the ingenious method of transplanting the meanings".⁵ Attracted above all to the semiotic fantasies of Belgian painter, René Magritte, Sooster was inspired in 1959 to create his first surrealist

compositions. From then on, he developed a lexicon of recurring object-symbols which contained metaphorical meaning, weaving them together in his dreamlike visions. The egg, along with the fish and the juniper tree (memories from his youth by the coast in Estonia), emerged as his favourite symbols, with Sooster repeatedly commenting, "The egg is the symbol of life. The egg is birth".⁶ Due to his interest in philosophy and psychology, Sooster was no doubt drawn to the form of the egg as a signifier for a wide array of profound and conflicting themes: new life and opportunities as well as unfulfilled desire and unrealised potential; nurturing and protection juxtaposed with fragility and vulnerability; the giving of life mirrored by a retreat from life. Sooster was notably influenced in his fascination with the egg by Magritte, who featured the object repeatedly in his work. In Magritte's paintings of the 1930s, the egg was shown engaged as if a songbird in *Elective Affinities* (*Les affinités électives*), or as the catalyst for the artist's psychic experience in *Clairvoyance* (*La Clairvoyance*); while in a later work of 1957, *Variation of Sadness* (*Variante de la tristesse*), Magritte preempted Sooster's *Window* by showing two eggs against a sky in a *trompe l'oeil* setting. (Fig. 6) The egg was also a recurring symbol within the work of Salvador Dalí, another important influence on the development of Sooster's practice, most famously in *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (*Métamorphose de Narcisse*) of 1937, and *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* of 1943.

The year after Sooster arrived in Moscow, the sixth World Festival of Youth and Students opened in Moscow. In another watershed moment of Khrushchev's Thaw, this citywide event included a display of international art that contained exhibits by artists from fifty-two countries, including examples of Western modernism. Live demonstrations of action painting and illustrated lectures on abstract expressionism delivered by little-known American artist Harry Colman provoked intense interest among Russian visitors. (Fig. 7) This event is also known to have had a direct and lasting impact on the work of nonconformist artists: Sooster's great friend, Yuri Sobolev, as well as leading members of the Lianozovo Group, Lidiya Masterkova and Vladimir Nemukhin, and Estonian painter Lola Liivat, all turned to abstraction in response to seeing Colman's demonstration.⁷ Two years later, in the summer of 1959, the American National Exhibition in Moscow brought major examples of US avant-garde art to the USSR



9 Jackson Pollock, *Cathedral*, 1947. Enamel and aluminium paint on canvas, 181.61 × 89.06 cm. Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bernard J. Reis, 1950.87. © Jackson Pollock, OOA-S 2019.



10 Ülo Sooster, detail of *Window*.



11 Ülo Sooster, *Eye in the Egg* [*Silm munas*], 1962. Oil on paper, 75 × 109.5 cm. Tartu Art Museum.

for the first time. The most talked-about aspect of the art display was its collection of abstract paintings, including Jackson Pollock's monumental canvas, *Cathedral*, an example of his much-discussed "drip" painting style. (Fig. 8) No doubt influenced by my research interest in American-Soviet artistic relations during the early Cold War, I had been reminded of Pollock's painting while viewing Sooster's *Window* in the National Gallery depository for the first time. Contemplating the rectangles of the "window frame", formed from a dense mesh of threaded colours that shared the same palette as *Cathedral*, had immediately led me to wonder if Sooster had seen Pollock's painting in Moscow and might be paying tribute to the first drip painting to cross the "iron curtain". (Fig. 9) With further reading into Sooster's life, my suspicions were vindicated. It is indeed known that Sooster visited both the exhibition of student art in 1957 and the American National Exhibition two summers later. His interest in the latter show was such that he individually reviewed fifty of the exhibited works in letters to his friends in Estonia, while also noting that he had himself begun to experiment with creating totally abstract pictures.⁸ The woodland colours may also have served a dual purpose in Sooster's

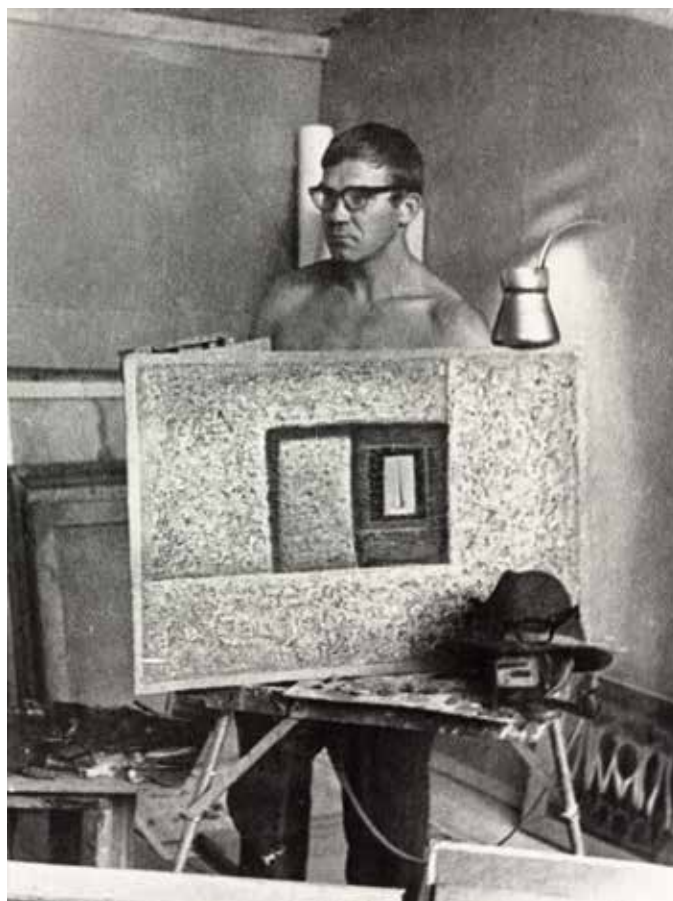
mind, as an abstract rendering of the forest theme than had developed from the symbol of the juniper.

Noticing the parallels between *Cathedral* and *Window* had at once conjured up in my mind the image of Sooster painting the work, as I wondered whether he had built up the layers in the manner of a traditional easel painting, or mirrored Pollock's practice of placing the canvas on the floor and pouring the paint from above. Looking intently at the texture failed to give up this secret, but did reveal what appear to be scraps of cardboard locked within the thick layers of paint. (Fig. 10) This again evokes Pollock's habit of incorporating foreign objects into his paintings, often detritus from his Long Island studio and the butts of cigarettes that he chain-smoked while working. A preoccupation with collage and assemblage using found objects was at the time also common among Sooster's artistic circle in Tartu, who he continued to visit and correspond with often. Ilya Kabakov has provided insight into Sooster's process, describing how the Estonian produced his reliefs "with a sculptor's knife from colored paste ... while it is still 'raw' putting into it little spheres, pieces of red glass, fragments of ceramics".⁹ Lidia Sooster similarly recalled how her husband

“manipulated paints, embossed paste, wood glue, fish glue, epoxy, he manipulated burnt bronze, which looked like antique copper, and squeezed nitro-enamel paints from a tube. He glued to the drawing ready-made painted squares, wings, tails, circles, sprayed paint to shade something, liked to scrape a picture with a needle and an awl”.¹⁰ As well as sharing a spontaneous, performative way of working, Pollock’s fascination with Jungian psychoanalysis and the subconscious also no doubt appealed to Sooster, providing guidance for the synthesis of abstraction and surrealism that had become his primary theoretical concern. The fact that *Cathedral* was shown in Moscow three years after Pollock had died in his mid-forties, crashing his car while drunk, would prove to be another tragic parallel between the artists when a decade later Sooster’s life was likewise cut short.

The advance of abstract painting into the Soviet capital in the late 1950s led its artists to anticipate that an end to state control over artistic production was imminent. Encouraged by the prospect, the Moscow Section of the Artists’ Union planned the showcase *New Reality* in 1962 at the city’s famous Manege exhibition hall. Named after Eli Beliutin’s art school, the display featured socialist realism alongside new work that proudly showed the influence of Western trends. Beliutin’s students were invited to contribute, along with members of the Sretensky Boulevard Group, including Sobolev, Yankilevsky and Neizvestny. Sooster was represented through his provocative *Eye in the Egg* (*Silm munas*), a painting in which the artist again combined his favourite symbol with a *trompe l’oeil* effect. Here the egg/eye creates the perception of infinite distance through the sequence of consecutive oval forms. In a cold, metallic grey, this eye appears less man than machine, an ever-seeing aperture that gives a disquieting sense of constant surveillance. (Fig. 11)

Sooster was one of thirteen nonconformist artists who were eagerly in attendance when Khrushchev visited the exhibition on 1 December, hoping to witness official acceptance of their vision for art after the Stalinist repression. However, their hopes were to be dashed. As Khrushchev toured the galleries with a crowd of Soviet bureaucrats, he became incensed by the dramatic deviations from socialist realism and reacted with expletive-laden tirades. Each of the artists was forced to account for their work and then publicly mocked and threatened with arrest and



12 Ülo Sooster in his studio, holding *Old Tallinn [Vana Tallinn]*, Moscow, 1960s. Photographer unknown. Tartu Art Museum.

deportation by the increasingly antagonistic group. When Sooster began to defend his painting, his heavy Estonian accent appears to have confused Khrushchev into silence. Instead, it was his Politburo colleague Alexander Shelepin, recently chairman of the KGB, who turned art critic to give his opinion on Sooster’s work. In a surprisingly perceptive analysis, Shelepin accused the picture of showing “an idea, hostile to us, that our knowledge is only a shell, and inside there is something completely different”.¹¹ After his visit, the *New Reality* exhibition was shut down on Khrushchev’s order, with the politician declaring, “Gentlemen, we are declaring war on you”.¹² In the aftermath, the government launched a renewed campaign against formalism and abstraction, effectively marking the end of the Thaw.

Although Sooster evaded arrest on this occasion, his confrontation with Khrushchev had a profound effect on the rest of his life. As commissions for work dried up, the artist found himself impoverished, with the new leadership of Leonid Brezhnev only hastening the return of cultural repression. It was in this tumultuous period that Sooster painted *Window*. The physicality of the work, constructed on cardboard, is perhaps



13 Ülo Sooster, *View of the Sea from Windows [Vaade merele akendest]*, 1968. Oil on plywood, 53.8 × 77.5 cm. Tartu Art Museum.

further evidence of his struggle to create, with materials scarce and canvases largely out of reach for someone officially registered as an illustrator. Yet despite its production at a moment of crisis in the artist's life, it is my belief that this work marks the achievement of Sooster's creative ambition. Even while awaiting his fate in a prison cell in Tartu, the night after his arrest, fellow painter Lembit Saarts remembers: "We were up all night talking mainly of art, about how to start anew when we returned. We talked about what art should be like. We thought it out and called it Dynamic Static."¹³ After establishing himself in Moscow, Sooster continued to work tirelessly to familiarise himself with new styles, work them into his practice, and find ways to bring them into combination with other creative trends. It is for this reason that art historian Francisco Martínez classifies Sooster as "a liminal being ... one that cannot be easily placed into a single category, one who challenges the cultural networks of social classification by representing a hybrid coexistence of opposites."¹⁴ Sobolev likewise recalled in later life:

In order to "mend" the gaps in his time, Sooster ... suggested (or, to be more correct, demanded) that we should restore, in a compressed way, the whole chain of development of art of the last thirty years: the principles of deformation of cubism and expressionism, the spatial inventions of Picasso, Braque, De Chirico, and Morandi, the abstractions of Mondrian and Pollock, the surrealism of Max Ernst and René Magritte, the poetics of Klee and Miró ... It was like a sophisticated theater performance. We wore holes in our trousers sitting in libraries, studying monographs and journals about the drama

*of art and the great masters of the twentieth century.*¹⁵

Eha Komissarov has contended that his attempts ultimately ended in failure, and that "Sooster's investigative creative method actually assaulted the notion of originality, but failed to come up with a useful alternative. He was a perfect type of a breakthrough period artist who existed at the boundary of the old and the new".¹⁶ Yet the connections in *Window* revealed above show that, rather than simply appropriating, Sooster was bringing into unison all the styles jostling for attention in Europe at mid-century. Part surrealism, part geometric abstraction, socialist realism and abstract expressionism, in a single work, Sooster overcame the assumption that these styles were contradictory or even antithetical. Thus, the enigmatic *Window* not only chronicles Sooster's own artistic trajectory and the creative milieu in which he and his contemporaries lived, but also provides a record of wider tensions in contemporary art: between figuration and abstraction, reality and fantasy, official and unofficial. Through the *trompe l'oeil* opening, it is as though the viewer is journeying backwards in time through the cultural trends that in turn dominated the four decades of Sooster's lifetime, with the egg symbolising the birth of modern art and, perhaps, of the artist himself.

The National Gallery's records mention Sooster's work as being part of a wider series entitled *Windows (Okna)*. Yet since the painting has remained in storage since its inclusion in an exhibition of Moscow nonconformist art in Brno in 1988, the connection to other examples of Sooster's oeuvre has been overlooked in recent retrospectives. Thanks to the present study, the National Gallery's *Window* can now be returned to its rightful place as one of three works in the "picture within a picture" series that Sooster created in the last decade of his life. In particular, it bears a striking resemblance to another painting that Sooster created in 1964, entitled *Old Tallinn (Vana Tallinn)*. (Fig. 12) Now held in a private collection, this window has an identical structure, with the same entanglement of pastoral colours and collage elements embedded in the paint. But this window looks out onto St. Olaf's Church in Tallinn: perhaps indicating homesickness or nostalgia on the part of the artist, but nonetheless a realistic view through a window, in comparison to the fantastical vision of an egg floating in the sky. A later work in the series, *View of the Sea from Windows (Vaade merele akendest)* from



14 René Magritte, *The Secret Life [La vie secrète]*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 57.2 × 75.9 × 2.9 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, bequest of Lockwood Thompson 1992.298. © René Magritte, OOA-S 2019.

1968, is in the collection of the Tartu Art Museum, the depository for most of the artist's paintings and drawings. (Fig. 13) In this painting, there are two windows onto a seascape, with waves appearing to flood through the opening, towards the viewer. Instead of the overlapping rectangles, a play of perspective that creates a sense of both physical and temporal distance, here the *trompe l'oeil* effect is more simplistic. Rather than formed from a mass of painted dribbles that recall Pollock's drip technique, these windows are framed by a single, flat layer of turquoise paint applied in a stucco effect, a more naturalistic rendering of a window in a seaside building than a magical peephole onto another world.

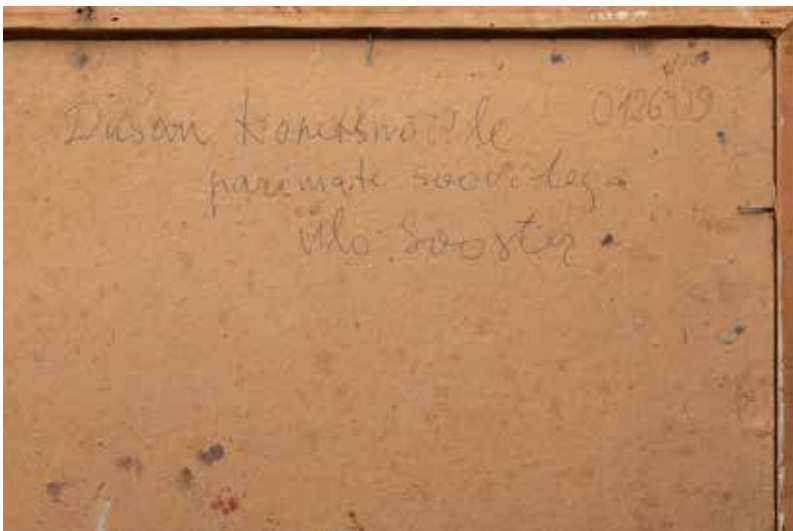
Liisa Kaljula, head of the painting collection at the Art Museum of Estonia, traces the image of "the hole in the concrete wall" to the psychological reverberations of Sooster's confinement in the Gulag. She also suggests that the impasto technique used in these paintings, but not evident in the work of other Moscow nonconformists, was an example of Sooster's ongoing artistic exchange with friends in Tartu, especially Ellinor Aiki.¹⁷ The window paintings have also been

previously discussed by other art historians, who have recognised the importance of the series in Sooster's career. Eha Komissarov has written that Sooster's windows were part of his surrealist play on the contrasts between familiarity and distance, the personal and universal, internal and external.¹⁸ Eda Sepp meanwhile says that Sooster used the window as a motif for a view into a different space, noting that the series inspired the younger Estonian artist Jüri Arrak to adopt the theme into his own pictures.¹⁹ In doing so, he was the latest in a sequence of artists who transmitted a single theme across the decades. While Sooster appropriated from Magritte, who produced a host of *trompe l'oeil* paintings of windows, doors and backdrops opening onto blue skies, the Belgian artist's work itself appears to borrow from earlier paintings by Dalí, such as *Girl at a Window*. (Figs. 14–15)

However, before Sooster had created his third painting in the series, the National Gallery's *Window* had begun its journey to Prague. Here the story of the painting becomes inextricably tied to that of its new owner. The work was gifted to the National Gallery in 1970, along with two

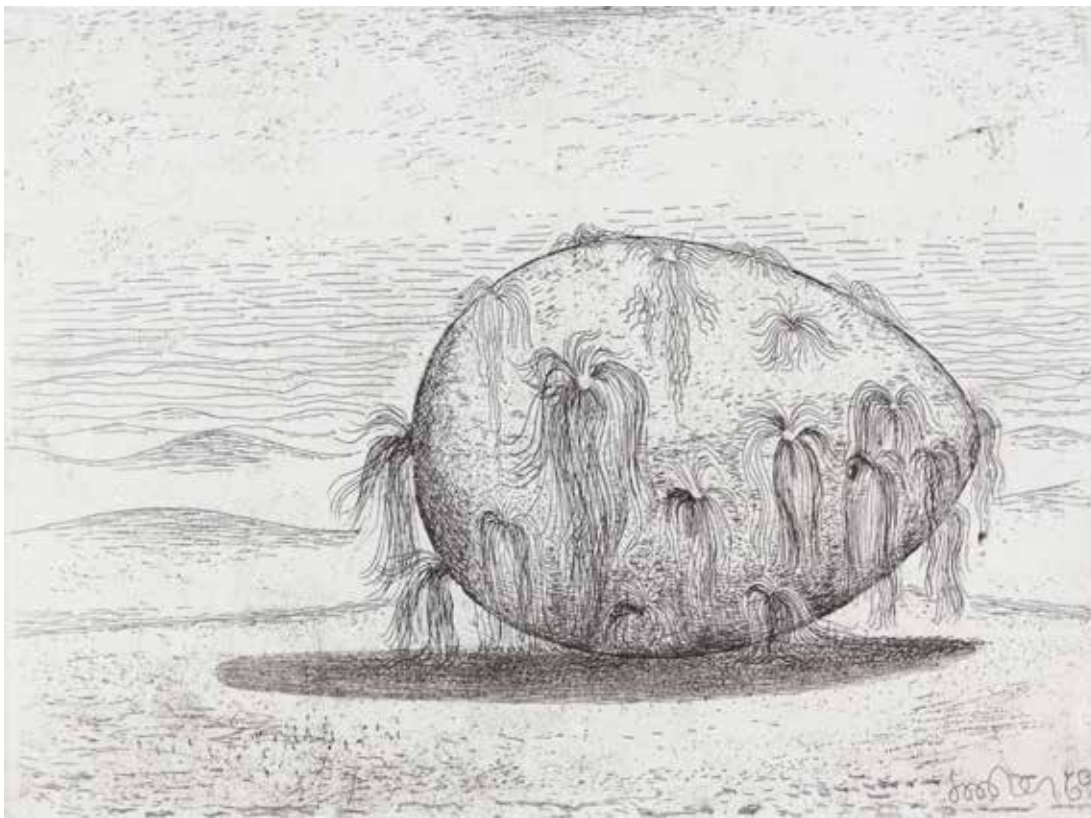


15 Salvador Dalí, *Girl at a Window* [*Figura en una finestra*], 1925. Oil on papier maché, 105 × 74.5 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. © Salvador Dalí, OOA-S 2019.



16 Ülo Sooster, detail of inscription on the back of *Window*.

collage paintings by Yankilevsky, also dated to 1964.²⁰ The donor, Dr. Dušan Konečný, was an important figure in the Prague art scene during the 1960s and 1970s, holding a series of influential roles, including as senior lecturer in art history and theory at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, board director of the Union of Czech Artists and Editor-in-Chief of the union's magazine *Visual Culture* (*Výtvarná kultura*). In his brief letter of donation, Konečný noted that the three paintings had been given to him by the artists, without further elaboration.²¹ Thanks to archival records and the recollections of Sooster's friends and family, the details of the painting's acquisition can be expanded upon. Konečný's interest in the work of Russian artists dates from the 1950s, when he had been a student in Moscow. Returning frequently to the city after his relocation to Prague, Konečný became acquainted with the underground art scene, about which he wrote a number of books and articles. He is known to have visited Sooster's workshop, as well as attending the regular Tuesday night gatherings in the artist's apartment on Krasin Street. Indeed, such was Konečný's status among the Sretensky Boulevard Group that he is credited with giving them their collective name, although Viktor Pivovarov has recalled that this honour instead went to another Czech art theorist who championed the work of the Moscow nonconformist artists in the 1970s: Jindřich Chalupický.²² Sooster's apparent decision to gift *Window* to Konečný, at a moment of financial hardship, is testament to the close friendship that developed between artist and collector. This bond is also evidenced on the cardboard back of the painting, where Sooster has dedicated the work to its new owner with the words "parimate soovidega" ("with best wishes" in Estonian). (Fig. 16) Konečný would later commemorate Sooster by writing his obituary in the Czech journal *Fine Art* (*Výtvarné umění*). It is known that from the mid-1960s, the artist risked selling works to foreign visitors, which in turn led them to appear in exhibitions in Poland, Italy and Germany. One such exhibition of nonconformist drawings and collages by Sooster and seven other members of his Moscow circle – including Yankilevsky, Sobolev, Neizvestny, Zhutovsky and Anatoly Brusilovsky – was curated by Konečný at the Club of Friends of Fine Arts (Klub přátel výtvarného umění) in Ústí nad Orlicí in September 1965. However, further opportunities for displays of such work in Czechoslovakia were lost with the invasion of the country



17 Ülo Sooster, *Egg with Growths* [*Kasvudega muna*], 1969. Etching on paper, 13 × 21 cm (image); 48.5 × 33.5 cm (sheet). Tartu Art Museum.

by the Warsaw Pact forces. In an ironic twist, when Soviet tanks entered Prague's Old Town Square on 21 August 1968, they were parked beneath a banner advertising an exhibition of Soviet revolutionary graphics at the National Gallery's Kinský Palace, on loan from the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and curated by Konečný. This exhibition foreshadowed the displays of officially sanctioned art from socialist countries that would dominate the National Gallery's public programmes during the years of occupation. However, Konečný's donations in 1970 were part of a surprisingly high number of avant-garde works that entered the gallery's collection soon after the invasion, suggesting that curators and collectors worked together to preserve at-risk artworks and to amass what they could of modernist styles before the anticipated return of cultural suppression.

The timing of the arrival of *Window* at the National Gallery is also significant for another reason. Two months before Konečný wrote his letter of donation, on 25 October 1970, Sooster suffered a fatal stroke in his studio on Sretensky Boulevard. In the years preceding, the crumbling representation of the egg perhaps provides a visual metaphor for the artist's own deteriorating health, as well as the shattering of creative freedom in countries within the Soviet sphere. While the egg at the centre of *Window* appears ready to crack, in the following years it would become increasingly damaged (*Fractured*

Egg, 1967), cancerous (*Egg with Growths*, 1969) (Fig. 17) and dissected (*Egg Divided into Four*, 1968–70). Finally, in a sketch found by Brusilovsky only after Sooster's death, the egg was shown broken into pieces, with a dead chick tumbling from its centre – an image thought to symbolise a broken heart.²³ Yet through works such as *Window*, Sooster's memory lives on, as imperishable as the egg that rests on his grave in Tallinn. (Fig. 18)

The author wishes to express special thanks to Ülo's son, Tennopent Sooster, as well as Liisa Kaljula and Anu Allas at Kumu, the Art Museum of Estonia, for their detective work, words of advice and generosity in sharing research materials.

18 The funeral of Ülo Sooster, Metsakalmistu, Tallinn, 1970s. Photographer unknown. Courtesy the estate of the artist. The original copper egg was stolen from the grave in 2000 and replaced with a marble version.



Notes

1 Interview with Evgeny Bachurin, “Hooandja ee project: Ülo Sooster documentary”, 10 April 2018, <http://vimeo.com/264031781>.

2 Eha Komissarov, “Art in Tartu during the Soviet Occupation”, in: *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, eds. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press/Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 2002, p. 142.

3 Flora Leipman, *The Long Journey Home: The Memoirs of Flora Leipman*, London: Corgi, 1988.

4 “Vtorym universitetom.” Quoted in Natal’ia Sinel’nikova, *Nonkonformisty*, Moskva: Virtual’naia galareia, 2009, p. 399.

5 Eha Komissarov, “Surrealistic Sooster”, in: *Ülo Sooster 1924–1970: mälestusnäitus*, ed. Tiina Abel (exh. cat.), Tallinn: Eesti Kunstimuuseum, 2001, p. 180.

6 “Iaytso – eto simvol zhizni. Iaytso – eto rozhdeniye.” Quoted in Sinel’nikova (Note 4), p. 404.

7 Kädi Talvoja, *Workshop of “Free” Art in Moscow in 1957*, Tallinn: Kumu Art Museum, 2008, p. 15; Eda Sepp, “Estonian Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Occupation in 1944 to Perestroika”, in: *Art of the Baltics*, p. 58.

8 Sepp, *ibid.*, p. 47.

9 Ilya Kabakov, *On Ülo Sooster’s Paintings: Subjective Notes*, Kirjastus Kunst, Tallinn 1996, p. 188, quoted in Sepp, *ibid.*, p. 48.

10 “...meshal kraski, rel’yefnuyu pastu, stolyarnyy kley, rybiy kley, epoksidnyy, meshal obozhzhennuyu bronzu, kotoraya vyglyadela kak starinnaya med’, a iz tyubika vydavlivat tonkimi struykami nitroemallevyye kraski. Prikleival k risunku gotovyye raspisnyye kvadratiki, krylyshki, khvostiki, kruzhochki,

raspylyal kraski, chtoby ottenit’ chto-libo, lyubil pokaryabat’ igolkoy i shilom risunok.” Quoted in Sinel’nikova (Note 4), p. 404.

11 “V kartine zalozhena ideia, vrazhdebnaia nam, chto znaniia nashi tol’ko obolochka, a vnutri chto-to sovsem inoe.” Leonid Rabichev, “Manezh 1962, do i posle”, *Znamiia* 9 (2001). Reproduced <http://magazines.russ.ru/znamiia/2001/9/rab.html>.

12 Sirje Helme, “Nationalism and Dissent: Art and Politics in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under the Soviets”, in: *Art of the Baltics*, p. 10.

13 Lembit Saarts, “Mälestusi Ülo Soosterist”, p. 87, quoted in Liisa Kaljula, “The Tartu Circle and Their Exquisite Domestic Avant-Garde”, in: *The Tartu Circle and Ülo Sooster*, ed. Anu Allas (exh. cat.), Tallinn: Kumu Art Museum, 2014, p. 30.

14 Francisco Martínez, “Ülo Sooster’s ‘Communitas’: Liminality in the Post-Stalin Art Practice”, in: *ibid.*, p. 52.

15 Yuri Sobolev, “Virtual Estonia”, in: *Tallinn–Moskva/Moskva–Tallinn, 1956–1985*, ed. Anu Liivak, Tallinn: Tallinn Art Hall, 1996, p. 25; quoted in: Sepp (Note 7), p. 47.

16 Komissarov, “Surrealistic Sooster” (Note 5), p. 180.

17 Liisa Kaljula in email to the author, 11 April 2019.

18 Komissarov, “Surrealistic Sooster” (Note 5), p. 150, p. 183.

19 Sepp (Note 7), p. 93.

20 The artist’s widow believes that the paintings were created in 1963. Rimma Yankilevsky in email to the author, 11 June 2019.

21 Dušan Konečný to Jiří Kotalík, 16 December 1970, Archives of the National Gallery Prague.

22 *Ülo Sooster. Tenno Sooster* (exh. cat.), Moskva:

Galareia Romanov', 2006; "Viktor Pivovarov:
V umění starých mistrů je spousta otázek, které
jsou věčné", *Vltava*, 10 November 2017, [http://
vltava.rozhlas.cz/viktor-pivovarov-v-umeni-
starych-mistru-je-spousta-otazek-ktere-jsou-
vecne-6197447](http://vltava.rozhlas.cz/viktor-pivovarov-v-umeni-starych-mistru-je-spousta-otazek-ktere-jsou-vecne-6197447).

23 Interview with Anatoly Brusilovsky,
"Hooandja.ee project: Ülo Sooster documentary",
10 April 2018, <http://vimeo.com/264031781>.