

Minna Henriksson:  
Art in the Service of the Nation -  
Or Why did Birgir Carlstedt abandon  
abstract art in the early 1930s?

*English translations from Finnish articles are my own and only for the purposes of the lecture performance 'Art in the Service of the Nation'.*

Hello!

Today we are gathering here in the Art Museum for our art history lesson. The theme of our lesson is Birger Carlstedt. Or more particularly, why did Carlstedt reject abstraction in early 1930s and go back to paint representational, largely expressionist or surrealist paintings, only to return to pure abstraction in 1950, or 1949?

For this lesson, to understand the shifts in styles of Carlstedt, it is important to know some background into what was going on in the art field, internationally and in Finland.

In early 1910s, around 1913 a truly abstract non-representational painting (meaning it did not have any starting/reference point in reality) first emerged, simultaneously in Russia by Vassily Kandinsky and in the Netherlands by Piet Mondrian, and then in 1915 Kazimir Malevich made **The Black Square** [draw black square] and defined Suprematism, which was the new painterly realism, a language in painting with no reference to world of objects. Malevich wrote in 1915: "I transformed myself in the zero of form... I destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring that confines the artist and forms of nature."

**The Russian avantgarde**, which was born of the revolutionary spirit in Russia, brought together a large amount of artists under various 'isms', closely connected with the working class revolution and the utopia of a new world of international socialism. One of the groups (Unovis) stated in their manifesto: "We will not be of our time if we do not bind together our personalities into a single force. We must gather like a strong hurricane to destroy the old and create the new." [...] "And so let us form a universal army for a new creativity in the arts."

The Russian avantgarde as well as **De Stijl** strove to develop new forms of artistic expression advocating pure abstraction and universality by a reduction to the essentials of form and colour. These movements were not restricted with any national borders, but perceived their activity as international, universal. For instance, there were close collaborations between the artists of the Russian Avantgarde and the Bauhaus in Germany in 1920s.

But what was happening in Helsinki?

The art of the beginning of the 19th Century in Finland had been dominated by [hat on] Karelianism. Karelianism was a term coined by an influential art historian and art critic **Onni Okkonen** [write Onni Okkonen's name] in 1949 when writing about Akseli Gallen-Kallela. The difference in Gallen-Kallela and his likes to previous generations of artists was that before 1890s artists had made travels to Karelia to collect topics, but Karelianists went to Karelia to hunt for material for "reality".

At that time, Kalevala, the Finnish national epic was assumed without question as originating from Karelia, although it contained poems collected in other regions too. Due to this appropriation by the Karelianists, Karelia was made the mythical place of the roots of Finnish nation. Jean Sibelius with his Karelia-suite and Akseli Gallen-Kallela with Kalevala-themed paintings and graphic art were among the central protagonists of Karelianism. [hat off]

But did the Russian and other international new avantgarde movements manage to enter Finland as well?

Yes they did. The Russian avantgardists, mainly futurists were gathering in Uusikirkko Southern Karelia at the summer house of artist and writer Elena Guro, which until 1944 was part of Finland. In 1913 there was held an important meeting which led to founding of the Futurist Theater under the name Budetlyanin. Also the first Futurist opera, Victory over the Sun, was started in Uusikirkko.

In Helsinki some of the notable Russian futurists were first exhibited in 1914, in an exhibition of the Munich-based group The Blaue Reiter, which was founded by Wassily Kandinsky. This exhibition was at Sven Stringberg Gallery in Esplanadi. Among the artists were David Burliuk and Natalia Goncharova, who were some of the central figures in the avant-garde movement in Russia.

One of the most influential art critics in Finland, **Edvard Richter** [write Edvard Richter's name] blamed the Blue Reiter -exhibition for [hat on] 'Reklaamihalu' (desire for sensation) and as humbuugitaide' (bogus art). [hat off]

In May 1916 there was another exhibition of Russian art in Salon Strindberg, which presented many Russian avant-garde artists and again had an extensive display of works by Wassily Kandinsky.

Onni Okkonen infantilised Kandinskys art, writing in Uusi Suometar in September 1916 that [hat on] “We can say that art, everywhere in the world when in the stage of childhood, has practiced similar drawings and shapes. Still today a child, before she/he starts to represent nature, and remember it, draws in sand, on table and on paper undefined shapes, to which she/he gives meanings randomly.” [hat off]

Due to these exhibitions at Salon Stindberg and gatherings of Futurists in Uusikirkko, the international abstract language must have had an influence on Finland as well.

Researcher Nikolai Sadik-Ogli writes about the Finnish Art Academy: “it is known that some students there had heard about the Impressionists, Expressionists, Cubists and Futurists and were in possession of books that contained illustrations of some representative examples of their oeuvres.”

There are also artworks which prove influences and awareness of the new artistic language. Urho Lehtinen and Yrjö Ramstedt have been described as futurists due to their paintings in 1913. And Ilmari Aalto’s early paintings from 1914-15 can be called Cubo-Futurist.

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What happened then?

The promising development in art in Finland of the international language of abstract painting was abruptly cut in 1918 by the Civil War and the killings in its aftermath. This split the nation in two, to winning Whites and the defeated Reds. Okkonen wrote in Uusi Suometar in 1918 demanding from art in Finland to carry Finnish national sentiments and unite the nation.

[hat on] “New raising Finland would without a doubt need from its art such a feeling of future, strength and life, which comes across for example in the emerging renaissance and Dutch new republic art. In this relation one would wish for the recently gained independency, growth of wealth to influence similarly swelling and giving posture to art, like in the old Dutch art was the case.” [hat off]

Art historian Tuula Karjalainen analyses that in the national art in Finland, which Onni Okkonen promoted, we can recognise two characteristics corresponding to two archetypes. These are the heroic and the expressive. The chief interpreters of the heroic type were Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Väinö Aaltonen. Gallen-Kallela, depicting the Finnish national epic Kalevala was according to Okkonen, [hat on] the griffin of Finnish art, where “in the roots of the the nation and the nature, the most noble characteristics of the race and of the soil got their deepest expression.” [hat off]

Wäinö Aaltonen on another hand was for Okkonen [hat on] “so purely Finnish that his national roots reached all the way to the neolithic age.” [hat off]

Wäinö Aaltonen was well aware of his task in depicting [hat on] “the finest ‘Finnish race’ [hat off] and his sculptures, at least the Paavo Nurmi, is an outcome of this. Tykö Sallinen on another hand represented the expressive type of the national art. He was praised by the leading nationally minded art critics in Finland. But Architect Alvar Aalto goes perhaps the furthest when he stated in 1922 (Iltalehti) comparing Sallinen and Gallen-Kallela: [hat on] “They are connected by clear “racial instincts” and indication to stylistic values of our own past”. [hat off]

In 1927 Onni Okkonen wrote in Uusi Suomi: [hat on] “**We have our forests** [draw forest], we have our healthy nature and our own head and heart! Let’s create art from them; there should indeed be enough material for now.” [hat off]

Anything coming from the East, where the new art had become inseparable from the October Revolution and artists took part in shaping the left front of art, was regarded dangerous. As the interwar period developed in Finland to more and more right-wing and intolerant by the 1930s, it increasingly closed into itself and anything coming from abroad, and anything, which was not representational, was deemed un-Finnish and therefore bad. The above mentioned art critics, Onni Okkonen, and Edvard Richter, along with **Ludvig Wennervirta** [write Ludvig Wennervirta] continued to dominate the art scene all through the interwar period.

Their power position was indeed strong.

Okkonen worked as the art history professor in Helsinki University from 1927 to 1948, and he was art critic in Uusi Suomi in 1916-20 and again in 1926-45. He is also the author of many influential opuses about Finnish art and held positions in board of Finnish Art Academy and the Kalevala association.

Wennervirta published the book "Finnish Art" in 1927, he wrote to several newspapers, among them the supporter of Lapua movement, Ajan Sana (1930-32) and Ajan Suunta, the paper of IKL (Patriotic People's Movement) in (1932-44)

Richter held a true power position in the art field working in Helsingin Sanomat as art critic from 1904 onwards for 47 years. Also he taught art history in the Finnish Art Academy School in 1904-47 and in the School of Applied Art in 1904-51.

We must not forget to include into this powerful front of the visual arts also the painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela [write his name], who was the head of the Finnish Art Society and the vice-president of the Kalevala association. He stated in a newspaper (Karjala, 1930) the following: [hat on] "We would need some kind of a Lapua movement also in art and a more brisk attitude than in general in these days. Our recent art-life has often been some kind of obfuscation of art with bolshevik labels, which has alienated large audiences from it." [...] "Life seen with artistic eyes is so beautiful and rich in itself that there is no need for formulas forced there by the fashion-followers. There is good material among our artists, they just need to throw away the costume that is stranger and pretentious, which is a reflection of the Jewishness of the Bolshevik world." [hat off]

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So was there any non-representational art before Carlstedt made his first totally abstract paintings?

Edwin Lydén from Turku, who had studied art in Munich in 1899, and had acquainted with Kandinsky and Paul Klee, is acknowledged as having been the first Finnish artist to create purely abstract, non-figurative works. In Munich in 1919 he encountered Cubism and Futurism.

Critic Edvard Richter wrote about his paintings in 1922: [hat on] "I fear that he has picked up there a style which in common art terminology could be called Futurist Cubism, but which might also be characterized more correctly as Jewish Cubism. (This same sort we had a bit before the World War on view in Helsinki in a Jewish-Russian-German exhibition.)" [hat off]

So, Carlstedt was the second, after Lydén to make purely abstract non-representational paintings. In 1930-31 Carlstedt visited Paris and it is most certain that it is there where he encountered concretist art.

Concretism was a movement started in 1929. Its manifesto stated among others the following:

"Art is universal.",

"A work of art must be entirely conceived and shaped by the mind before its execution. It shall not receive anything of nature's or sensuality's or sentimentality's formal data. "

"The painting must be entirely built up with purely plastic elements, namely surfaces and colors. A pictorial element does not have any meaning beyond "itself"; as a consequence, a painting does not have any meaning other than "itself".

"The painting technique must be mechanic, i.e., exact, anti-impressionistic." and so on.

It is clear that it had its roots in Dutch De Stijl movement and constructivism of the Russian avantgarde. [write names of the different styles] Similarly like those movements, it was also against any kind of symbolism or representation.

This is the style which Carlstedt adopted in early 1930s. There are altogether four early abstract paintings in Birger Carlstedt's early period. One 'Circle and triangles' and three 'Cubist composition'.

Carlstedt had his first major exhibition in Helsinki in Taidehalli in 1932, where among other works, he presented these early abstract paintings. The response he received from the main art critics was crushing for his young painter's ego.

Wennervirta wrote in Ajan Sana about the exhibition with the title 'Ala-arvoista taidetta' (Inferior art) that [hat on] "B. Carlstedt's art illustrates the decadence prevalent at the times." [hat off]

Richer wrote about it in Helsingin Sanomat (calling Carlstedt's paintings [hat on] 'vaivaisia graafillisia tekeleitä' (miserable graphic pieces of junk) that in them:

"Constant, sick approach or pretentious taste become too obvious." [hat off]

In 1933 Wennervirta still wrote (in Valvoja-aika), obviously referring to Carlstedt's travels to Paris that:

[hat on] "With us also in our art of the past decades one can observe a lot of formulaism, a lot of lifeless imitation of stranger artists styles, which have been developed by the countless study trips abroad by our painters and sculptors." [...] "Nevertheless, in my opinion, more important than imitating foreigner art styles, is without doubt a first hand research of one's homeland. Only going this way with our unique national characters we can enrich also European art." [hat off]

The question today is why did Carlstedt stop painting abstract and go into representational language for almost twenty years? One answer, which is usually offered, is that it was due to financial reasons. But the financial difficulties were caused by collectors avoiding his paintings, which did not get good reviews from the conservative critics, who only understood nationalist paintings.

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In 1950 Carlstedt turned back to abstraction.

According to Tuula Karjalainen we cannot look at his work from 1950s as a logical continuation to his non-representational art in 1930s.

What had changed in the meanwhile? He continued following to the principles of concretism. Perhaps we have to look at the change not in his art but in abstract art itself and what it signified.

In Soviet Union during Stalin's era the avantgarde art had to be buried and hidden, and socialist realism became the official art in mid-1930s. Abstract art, which was once fed by the October revolution into a union of formal and political, had moved from East to West. In the hands of Alfred H. Barr Jr., the founder of MoMa New York, abstract painting became a mere artistic style, even a decoration signifying bourgeois good taste, which was promoted in 1950s as an American product that stood for values of freedom, democracy, and individualism...

And clearly a male-gendered ethnically white western kind.

Circulating exhibitions of American **abstract expressionism** [write on the board] were sent around Europe to promote American values. These exhibitions had a secret CIA funding. Art was in this way used as soft weapon in the so-called Cold War between USA and USSR.

In Finland there were some of these touring exhibitions on view as well, all organised by MoMa New York. One of them was in **1954** in **Taidehalli** [write on the white board], titled "12 American painters and sculptors".

In **1959** **Taidehalli** [write on the white board] hosted a massive photography exhibition, "Ihmisen suku – The Family of Man", which art historian Maija Koskinen regards as probably the most successful weapon of cultural diplomacy during the cold war.

Yet another one was "Modern American drawings", in **Taidehalli** in April-May **1962** [write on the white board]. But there was another one just a couple of months later, in July-August **1962** during the massive World Youth Festival of Peace and Friendship, which was organised by the socialist-block countries. It seems that the forces resisting to the Youth Festival badly needed American abstract expressionism as counter-propaganda to demonstrate the western cultural superiority and therefore the European tour of this exhibition was interrupted for the works to be shipped to Helsinki for two weeks only, which was the duration of the festival as well. The exhibition was titled "Young America Presents" and it was in **Ateneum** [write the year and place on the white board] in Helsinki.

To my knowledge the last of the MoMa's circulating exhibitions was in **1967** in the **Amos Anderson** [write on the white board] Art Gallery, an exhibition titled "American collages".

Artist Eva Cockroft wrote in 1985: "In the world of art, Abstract Expressionism constituted the ideal style for these propaganda activities. It was the perfect contrast to the "regimented, traditional, and narrow" nature of "socialist realism." It was new, fresh and creative. Artistically avant-garde and original, Abstract Expressionism could show the United States as culturally up-to-date in competition with Paris. This was possible because Pollock, as well as most of the other avant-garde American artists, had left behind his earlier interest in political activism."

To conclude today's lecture about the —national and international— politics of abstract and representational art, I would like to quote Bengt von Bonsdorff in catalogue of Carlstedt's exhibition in Amos Anderson in 1992-93. Bonsdorff had recorded interviews with Carlstedt in his late days, 1972-73, and explains that in Carlstedt's opinion in the early 1970s abstract art had hard times and art critics only accepted art that endorsed critical standpoints. He directly quotes Carlstedt saying: [hat on] "Before everything had to be so national. Nowadays one needs to follow the latest foreign fashion silliness." [hat off]

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#### Terms:

**Impressionism** developed in France in the nineteenth century and is based on the practice of painting out of doors and spontaneously 'on the spot' rather than in a studio from sketches. Main impressionist subjects were landscapes and scenes of everyday life

**Expressionism** refers to art in which the image of reality is distorted in order to make it expressive of the artist's inner feelings or ideas

**Cubism** was a revolutionary new approach to representing reality invented in around 1907–08 by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. By breaking objects and figures down into distinct areas – or planes – the artists aimed to show different viewpoints at the same time and within the same space and so suggest their three dimensional form.

**Futurism** was a twentieth-century Italian and Russian avant-garde movement in literature and arts. It promoted extreme artistic innovation and experimentation, declaring a radical disassociation from the past and a focus on new art, technology, and politics. Italian Futurism began with a manifesto by F. T. Marinetti in 1909. Russian Futurism, like Italian Futurism, began as a revolt against the symbolist movement in Russia. The Russian Futurists split into two sub-schools: Cubo-Futurism and Ego-Futurism.

**Cubo-Futurism** was a term used by the early 20th-century Russian avant-garde to describe literary and artistic works that represented a fusion of Cubist and Futurist styles and principles. The term surfaced in 1912, at a point when the Russian avant-garde were exposed simultaneously to Analytical Cubism and Italian Futurism. At this stage in their development, young Russian poets and painters were beginning to move away from forms of Expressionism and to explore more innovative approaches. Cubism and Futurism offered the ideological and practical means to engage with abstraction and, ultimately, non-objectivity, in a serious and distinctive manner. By 1915, however, Cubism and Futurism had exhausted their usefulness for these poets and painters, who had now passed into completely new territory in the form of zaum (transrational) poetry, Suprematism and, subsequently, Constructivism.

**Abstract expressionists** were mostly based in New York City, and also became known as the New York school. The name evokes their aim to make art that while abstract was also expressive or emotional in its effect.

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