

# IRISH MODERNISMS: SEMINAR 4 | GLOBAL CONTEXTS POST-SOVIET BALTIC

**SPEAKERS: ANDRES KURG, MARI LAANAMETS**  
**DISCUSSION MODERATER: DR KATHRYN MILLIGAN**

WEDNESDAY 18 AUGUST 2021, 1PM



**CCA** DERRY~  
LONDONDERRY

# IRISH MODERNISMS:

## SEMINAR 3

12:45pm

Waiting room opens

1pm

Welcome from Irish Modernisms  
Co-curators Catherine Hemelryk &  
Matt Retallick

1:10pm

Andres Kurg:  
The Pärnu KEK Settlement and the  
Architecture of Built Socialist Success

1:30pm

Mari Laanemets:  
Engaging Abstraction: the work of  
Sirje Runge.

1:50pm

Screen break

2pm

Discussion facilitated by  
Dr Kathryn Milligan

2:30pm

Close

# WELCOME

Thank you for joining us for our series of seminars exploring Irish Modernisms and their Global Contexts.

This seminar season is on the occasion of Irish Modernisms, an exhibition by five artists from NI who are inspired by, respond to and collectively highlight the complex and nuanced influence of Modernism in the north. You can find out more at [CCADLD.org](http://CCADLD.org).

Each lunchtime seminar pairs speakers with a passion about an aspect of Modernism to give a glimpse into the wealth of research and sheer breadth of the influence Modernism has had across the globe.

Today's seminar comes from Estonia, the most northern Baltic country that was part of the USSR until independence in 1991. As in NI, Modernism in Estonia can be found across architecture, art, design and infrastructure and our speakers consider two elements of a key example, Pärnu KEK, and we are delighted to introduce speakers Andres Kurg and Mari Laanemets to share their research and insights with us all.

You can catch up with the previous seminars at [CCADLD.org](http://CCADLD.org) and thank you all for joining us for today's event!

Catherine & Matt  
Irish Modernisms Curators

# IRISH MODERNISMS | GLOBAL CONTEXTS

## POST SOVIET BALTIC

Andres Kurg | The Pärnu KEK Settlement and the Architecture of Built Socialist Success

The Pärnu KEK was a collective farm built in Soviet-era Estonia. Located in the seaside town of Pärnu, the KEK is one of the key examples of Modernist buildings of the Baltic region. It combines living and working facilities with semi-detached homes and a 700-metre-long terraced housing with a kindergarten, woodwork and metal workshop, and office spaces of the construction company. Built in the first half of the 1970s, this project has traditionally been seen as representing Neofunctionalism in Estonian architecture – a tendency referring back to the prototypes of inter-war modernism and to the period of Estonian independence. These buildings with white plastered walls and abstract geometric compositions, that often included semicircular and stepped rectangular volumes, emerged in the late 1960s as a reaction to the official Soviet architecture, as well as to the fascination with Finnish postwar modernism among Estonian architects. The Neofunctionalist course was associated with the designs emerging from the Collective Farm Design Office 'EKE projekt', that, because of the independent resources available from collective farms, had a considerable autonomy in the use of construction materials and methods but also freedom from aesthetic regulations, compared to major State design offices.

If majority of Soviet buildings in Estonia have after the end of the Soviet period been stigmatised as "grey" and "monotonous", Neofunctionalist heritage has on the other hand been interpreted from an Estonian perspective as "our own" architecture and thus untainted by the socialist regime. Yet, looking from the perspective of social and institutional structures and the economic history of the period, it would be hard to dissociate this architecture entirely from the state socialist system and its networks of production. Even more, its typologies, spatial distribution and the communities it has brought together were in many ways indebted to the structures, as well as the ideals, of the socialist state. Andres' talk will attempt to re-read the Pärnu housing and working complex in the light of this social-historical perspective. Similarly to recent critical historiography of Soviet architecture, he wants to ask if we could address the Pärnu complex as an example of "built socialist success" (Murawski 2018), representing forms of property and lifestyle of state socialism that could not have emerged in this form elsewhere.

## Mari Laanemets | Engaging Abstraction: the work of Sirje Runge

Pärnu KEK included a kindergarten whose design was entrusted to Sirje Runge (b. 1950), who had graduated from the Estonian State Art Institute in 1975 as an industrial designer. Her spectacular thesis project had studied the built space of Tallinn's city centre and proposed playful solutions to transform it in the spirit of a leisure society.

After graduating, Runge began to explore the possibilities of geometric abstraction. Within a short period of time, she produced two series of geometric paintings in which colorful geometric shapes interact with each other and create dynamic relationships and vivid structures that engage the viewer.

Traditionally, abstract art has been understood as a realm of artistic and individual freedom. In recent art histories, written after Estonia regained independence in 1991, this trend has been interpreted as an "art of elegant refusal", which confronted official demand on art such as propaganda and education, with a "tacit neutrality". The colorful patterns of Runge's paintings are usually associated with the neutral and distant aestheticism of urban culture. I would like to argue, however, that her rediscovery of geometric abstraction was far more ambitious than neutrality and withdrawal. Her art is related to ideas that sought to redefine relations of art, environment and society, and was informed by information theory and cybernetics, but also Russian constructivism. Unlike rational abstraction pursued in industrial design in order to apply control and regulate the chaos of the environment, Runge's Geometries with the theme "interaction and conflict" are ambivalent. While she on the one hand intends to engage the viewer, on the other hand she reveals the complexity and potential violence inherent in the supposed openness and democracy of geometric abstraction. Rather than harmony, her paintings evoke insecurity and excitement – the inconsistency of visual information, unexpected perspectives and shifts animate the viewer's sensing capacities.

These experiments carry over into the design of the Pärnu KEK kindergarten playgrounds, where Runge not only uses the primary colours yellow, blue and red, but also creates a complex and playful spatial structure out of concrete walls and ramps.

# ABOUT THE SPEAKERS & FACILITATOR

**Andres Kurg** Andres Kurg is professor of architectural history and theory at the Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn. His academic work specialises on the art and architecture of the Soviet period, with a special focus on the influence of technological transformations and changes in everyday life to the built environment from 1960s to 1980s. He has published articles in AA Files, ArtMargins, Home Cultures, Journal of Architecture; and contributed to several collected volumes and exhibition catalogues. He has curated exhibitions on Soviet architecture and design, including *Centrifugal Tendencies: Tallinn, Moscow, Novosibirsk* at the Museum of Architecture Drawing in Berlin, 2017, and held guest fellowships at the Getty Research Institute and Yale University.

**Mari Laanemets** is an art historian and curator, and is currently senior researcher at the Institute of Art History, Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn. Her research looks at alternative art practices in the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and 1970s in their intersections with architecture and design as well as in relation to technological transformations and science. She is interested in exhibition histories and the organisation of art in Eastern-Europe. She has curated several exhibitions, the latest *Abstraction as an Open Experiment* with works by Zofia Kulik, Sirje Runge, Dóra Maurer and Falke Pisano (Tallinn Art Hall, 2018). She published articles in ArtMargins, Springerin, Camera Austria, Rethinking Marxism; and contributed to several collected volumes and exhibition catalogues. Her publications include: *Abstraction as an Open Experiment* (Lugemik, 2019), *Mladen Stilinovic. On Money and Zeros* (Revolver Publishings by Vice Versa 2008), *Zwischen westlicher Moderne und sowjetischer Avantgarde: Inoffizielle Kunst in Estland 1969-1978* (Gebrüder Mann Verlag, 2011).

**Dr Katy Milligan** is an art historian specialising in nineteenth and twentieth century Irish art. Following her PhD studies Katy was the inaugural ESB Fellow at the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland, and an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Art History and Cultural Policy, UCD. Her first monograph, *Painting Dublin, 1886 - 1949: Visualising a changing city*, was published by Manchester University Press in 2020.  
[katymilligan.com](http://katymilligan.com)

**Catherine Hemelryk** FRSA was born in Rugby and has been Director at the CCA Derry~Londonderry since 2018. She has previously been Curator at CAC Vilnius, Artistic Director at NN, Northampton. Catherine studied Fine Art at Newcastle University and MA Curating Contemporary Art at Royal College of Art, London. She is a guest lecturer, commissioner and has been guest curator and in residence across Europe including GeoAIR Tbilisi, Sea Foundation Tillburg and Wysing Arts Centre. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

**Matt Retallick** is a curator based in Liverpool. He is an Irish citizen, and runs the Instagram @modernist.ie, an archive of everyday Irish design modernism. He is an honorary lifetime member of The Modernist Society, and is studying for an art history PhD at Manchester School of Art. Matt is Associate Curator of PINK, Manchester.  
[@matt\\_retallick](https://www.instagram.com/matt_retallick)

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Cover image: Toomas Rein, *Pärnu KEK Construction company housing complex "Kuldne kodu" (Golden home)*, 1972-77. Photograph: Museum of Estonian Architecture

