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## Hauntings: Taking a Look at Elga Sesemann's Landscapes

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### Introduction

Inspired by the exhibition 'The Modern Woman' at the Ateneum Art Museum earlier this year, I consider the work of one of the artists in the show, Elga Sesemann (1922–2007), who is now becoming an increasingly interesting figure after largely being consigned to obscurity in Finnish art history.<sup>1</sup>

I will attempt to introduce a new analytical perspective into the discussion regarding Sesemann's career in the 1940s and my text is to some extent experimental. The decade of Sesemann's powerfully expressionist painting has already attracted curiosity among scholars, but nevertheless research on this artist remains limited. In 1959 Sesemann wrote an autobiographical novel, *Kuvajaisia – erään omakuvan taustamaisemaa* (*Reflections – the background view of a certain self-portrait*<sup>2</sup>). The novel has been applied to the study of her self-portraiture.<sup>3</sup> The framework in this article is taken from sociology, but my hope is that by reconciling sociological writing with art history, it will be possible to bring something new to the discussion of the expressionism for which Sesemann's paintings from the period are known.

Elga Sesemann was born in 1922 and raised in Tienhaara, in the vicinity of Vyborg, in Karelia. She was from a family of Baltic-Russian-Finnish heritage, who had migrated from Lübeck to Vyborg during the 1660s. Her father Edgar Sesemann, an engineer, was the director of a local oil company.<sup>4</sup> The family home of the young Elga was both bourgeois and artistic, with music being especially important in the family.<sup>5</sup> The languages spoken at home were Russian and German.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the 17-year-old Elga had to leave her hometown behind.<sup>6</sup> Earlier in 1939, to the great sorrow of Elga, her father had passed away. They evacuated briefly to Nakkila, in Western Finland, from where the family of now three

1 E.g. Master's thesis by Rosa Huupponen in 2021. '*Kaikki tämä on ollut eikä tule koskaan enää. Sitä on vaikea ajatella.*' *Omaelämäkerrallisuus, eksistentialismi ja moniaikaisuus kuvataiteilija Elga Sesemannin tuotannossa*. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Jyväskylä. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/76326> (accessed 15 October 2022).

2 Free translation by the author of this article. To the best of the author's knowledge, the novel has not been published in English.

3 Rosa Huupponen applies textual references from the autobiographical novel to the analysis of Elga Sesemann's self-portraits. The author claims that the themes and subjects in Sesemann's paintings resonate with the subject matters in the novel. Huupponen, '*Kaikki tämä on ollut...*', 5.

4 Riitta Konttinen. *Täältä tullaan! Naistaitelijat modernin murroksessa*. Helsinki: Siltala, 2017, 238.

5 Edgar Sesemann, Elga's father, made instruments, which were so-called 'Sesemann-violins' and repaired cellos. Her mother, Olga Sesemann, played the piano. Konttinen, *Naistaitelijat modernin murroksessa*, 240–41.

6 E.g. Konttinen, *Naistaitelijat modernin murroksessa*, 238.

(Elga, her sister Nelly and mother Olga) made their way to Helsinki. Settling in the Kaivopuisto neighbourhood, Elga then began her art studies.<sup>7</sup> These years were formative in giving birth to Sesemann's vision of how to paint original, powerful, and even radical work.<sup>8</sup> Elga met her future husband Seppo Näätänen (1920–64) at the art school, and in 1945 they married.

In addition to producing self-portraits of psychological depth and mystery, during the 1940s Sesemann also made portraits (many of them commissions), landscapes, interiors, still-lives and works that the art historian Riitta Konttinen describes as 'pictures of the mind'.<sup>9</sup> This short article looks at a couple of her landscapes and interiors, which so far have received less attention than the self-portraits from the same period.

The first section introduces the theoretical background. The second scrutinises Sesemann's landscapes depicting the urban environment, and the final section draws the themes and concepts of the article to a conclusion.

## Hauntology

Hauntology is a term not much seen in the context of art or as an analytical tool in art-historical writing. I first came across the term in the context of literary analysis in a podcast.<sup>10</sup> This led me to read Avery Gordon and Mark Fisher, two contemporary scholars who work in their respective fields with hauntology. However, the use of hauntology goes back to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who coined the term in his 1993 text *Specters of Marx*. Derrida uses hauntology (a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology*, in French *hantologie*) in the context of political analysis after Karl Marx and the past vision of communism. With this he refers to a set of cultural or social ideas that affect the present from 'the grave', so to speak – things that originate in the past, that may never have come to fulfilment, yet persist in cultural memory. However, different scholars have used hauntology in varying contexts with varying definitions, and it is as such not an easily definable term.

Rather than trying to give a clear definition of hauntology, it might be more useful to look at what possibilities for discussion are prompted with the use of the tools of language that it provides. Hauntology is concerned with such matters as the experience of temporality, cultural memory, and absence. In sociological analysis, it recognises how elements from the past (within a certain cultural context) persist in cultural memory and thus affect the present. In this way, the past takes the form of a ghost that haunts the present. The ghost can be understood as the thing that haunts, but it should not be taken literally, at least regarding what concerns this article. In no way am I suggesting that suddenly ghosts are real in the sense that is scientifically verifiable.

Rather, as I understand it, ghosts are representations of things that (invisibly) haunt the present – they are a linguistic tool to talk about the invisible, which might be otherwise hard to explain. For example, ghosts can take the form of historical memory or a weird presence of something that is felt. We might consider that haunting defines itself by the negative – that which is missing but nevertheless should be there. Elga Sesemann said in an interview that what really inspires her painting in ways that are immediate and forceful, is music, 'even though it is not "visible" in the painting, and nothing can be said about it'.<sup>11</sup> But why should it be that nothing can be said about it? My reason for choosing hauntology resonates precisely

7 Her first studies were in the evening classes of the School of Applied Arts, where she was subsequently accepted as a student of the drawing school. In 1943 she began her studies in painting at the same school, continuing at the Free Art School until 1944. Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 242.

8 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 242.

9 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 243.

10 The podcast in question is called 'Witch, Please', a critical perspective on the Harry Potter novels using different theoretical tools, such as feminist theory, critical race theory and queer theory, among others. The podcast is run by two university scholars, Hannah McGregor and Marcelle Kosman.

11 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 243.

with how Sesemann herself put it: to recognise that which nothing can be said about and, to talk about that which is not necessarily visible in a painting, but still affects it.

An important factor to consider is not just temporality, but rather the social experience of time. Hauntology offers a new perspective in perceiving the dimensions of time in a more intertwining manner. In fact, even though haunting is something that relates a past event to the present, hauntology also deals with the future. Namely, how a past idea of how the future would be remains in cultural memory. Mark Fisher uses hauntology in music analysis by claiming that the future is necessarily experienced in the present as a haunting, 'as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production'.<sup>12</sup> In Fisher's analysis of electronic music after the Second World War it is not so much the past itself that haunts the present, but rather 'all of the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate'.<sup>13</sup>

The future, in Fisher's post-World War context, is experienced as a failure because it did not turn out as the past envisioned it. This, in the context of cultural production, resulted in what Fisher calls a cultural impasse.<sup>14</sup> In this way the hauntology of the future that never came to be will reveal itself as a sense of nostalgia. How this is manifest in any cultural product can be, for instance, a return to past trends or forms. However, this way of thinking about cultural production might easily be mistaken to mean that there exists a zeitgeist through which culture is both born and perceived. On the contrary, I believe the point is more that, with the help of this kind of vocabulary, we can analyse certain cultural products like paintings or music through the perspective of not just the temporal dimension of the present, but rather, the past.

## The Cityscapes as Places of Haunting

Elga Sesemann painted the city with its streets and buildings, but mostly without any people or perhaps just a solitary figure. It is interesting to consider these cityscapes from the viewpoint of haunting, because of the spectral quality of the figures in some of them. They often lack individuality, or are shown as almost literal spectres, for example in *Street View*, from 1947, in which the figures have been drawn with pastels onto the painted background so that they remain transparent.

In the 1945 painting *Street*, the colours are vivid and the space is filled with light. The environment is an urban one, with its yellow and green apartment buildings and telegraph poles, it is clearly picturing a city. The shadow of the single person depicted in the painting is cast onto the pastel-coloured pavement and the darker figure makes a contrast to the otherwise light-filled space. This is industrial, post-war Helsinki as imagined by Sesemann. Art historian Susanna Pettersson writes that the buildings 'grow into masses of colour', whose windows remain referential, making them thus seem quiet and closed.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the buildings amplify the atmosphere of loneliness in the painting.<sup>16</sup>

Gordon calls haunting a sociopolitical-psychological state, and a frightening one.<sup>17</sup> In her book *Ghostly Matters* she describes haunting as follows:

*What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive*

12 Mark Fisher. 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1, Fall 2012, 16.

13 Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', 16.

14 Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', 16.

15 Susanna Pettersson. 'Kaupungin ja ihmisen kuva', in *Kohtaamisia kaupungissa – Suomalaista taidetta 1900–luvulta*. Helsinki: Grano, 2018, (80–103) 94.

16 Pettersson, 'Kaupungin ja ihmisen kuva', 94.

17 It is a state of turmoil and trouble, the moment of something-to-be-done, as Gordon calls it. We should not understand it as synonymous with trauma. Avery F. Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, xvi.



**Elga Sesemann, *Street*, 1945,**  
 oil on canvas, 73.5cm x 54cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum  
 Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



**Elga Sesemann, *Street View*, 1947,**  
 pastel on paper, 48.3cm x 37.5cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum  
 Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Jenni Nurminen



**Elga Sesemann, *The Flower Seller*, 1946,**  
 oil on cardboard, 53cm x 42.5cm  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum  
 Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

*instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises spectres, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These spectres or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomise is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view.*<sup>18</sup>

Reading Gordon's description of haunting resonates with me as I look at Elga Sesemann's paintings from the 1940s. In short, Gordon understands haunting as something that alters the experience of being in time and how it comes forth as a feeling, or experience: the repetitive instances of home becoming unfamiliar and of one's bearings on the world losing direction. These themes, to me, present themselves as I look at the lonely figures in *Street*, *Interior*, *The Flower Seller* or *Street View*. Susanna Petterson describes them as 'certain kind of closed mindscapes'.<sup>19</sup>

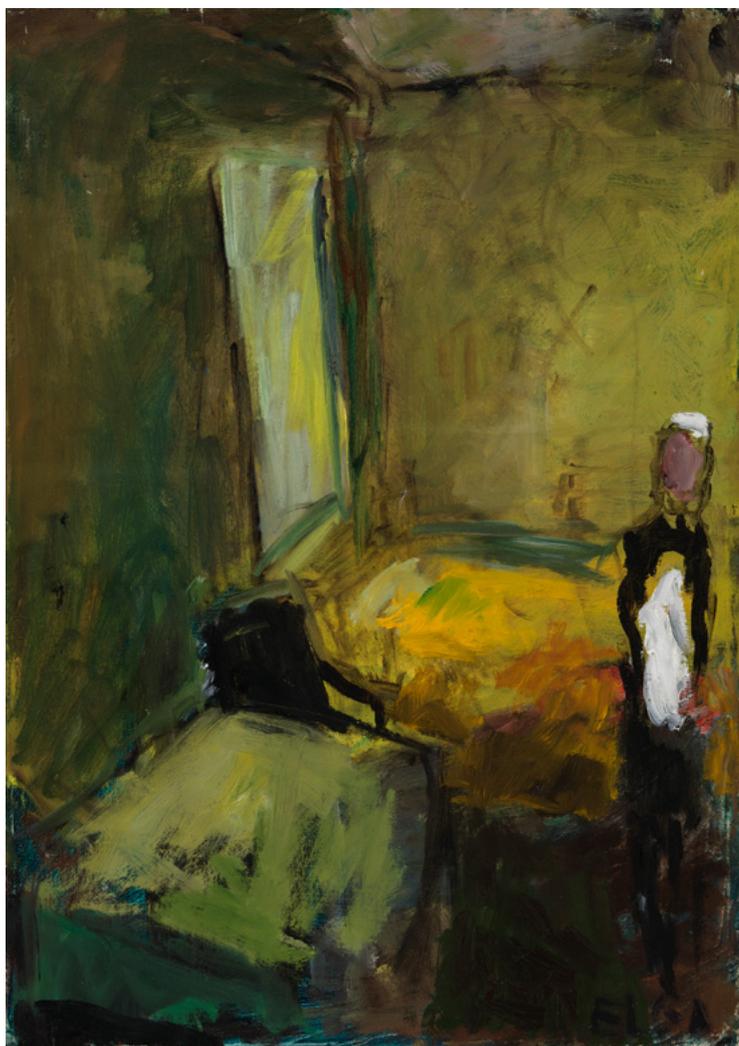
In both *Street* and *The Flower Seller* the buildings around amplify the sense of loneliness. The figures are small against the backdrop of the buildings, which could be considered to connect to themes of absence or even death. In particular, the phrasing of home becoming something unfamiliar resonates – the question in the case of Sesemann's Helsinki might also be: is this melancholic, anonymous urban city supposed to feel like home? The city and its people as something hidden behind anonymity is not a theme that is unique to Sesemann – it can be seen, for example, in the paintings by Marcus Collin (1882–1966) or prints by Helmi Kuusi (1913–2000).<sup>20</sup>

The atmosphere of the urban city takes centre stage and becomes in the expressionist view a mirror for the psyche. Riitta Konttinen draws a connection between the devastating years of war, the loss of home and hometown, and the deep melancholy of Sesemann's

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

<sup>19</sup> Petterson, 'Kaupungin ja ihmisen kuva', 94.

<sup>20</sup> Petterson, 'Kaupungin ja ihmisen kuva', 88.



Elga Sesemann, *Interior*,  
 1940–49, oil on canvas.  
 50.5cm x 35.5cm  
 Finnish National Gallery /  
 Ateneum Art Museum  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
 Hannu Pakarinen

paintings.<sup>21</sup> Gordon points out that haunting comes to a place when an unresolved social violence makes itself known. Is war, and with it the loss of one's childhood home, an 'unresolved social violence'? After the Sesemann family's evacuation from Karelia, there was no return. This loss of home and thereby a part of one's former identity is something that the paintings' atmospheres allude to.

Of all the works mentioned above, *Interior* (1940–49) seems the most ominous in atmosphere. A lonesome figure without any distinct facial features is standing inside a room that is almost empty, except for a table and chair. The scene that unfolds is spooky, almost claustrophobic, with its fisheye-like curved perspective, were it not for the light that seems to shine out of the doorway on the left side of the painting. As in *Street*, the elements come together as blocks of colour that Sesemann created with visible strokes, often using a palette knife. The figure is wearing black and white, and I am reminded of waitresses with their white aprons; yet, were it a café, there would be no-one inside.

Sesemann is known to have often used the word 'macabre' when talking about her art and describing its quality.<sup>22</sup> Some of the themes that she worked with include death, old age, illness, and a sense of isolation. These, according to Konttinen, are themes that are typical of the expressionists.<sup>23</sup> Death and ghosts are inextricably linked – there can be no ghosts without death. In *Street View* – a crude pastel picture – the people are painted to look transparent. They wander through the grey and snow-white city in a single, anonymous group and they appear to look like ghosts in quite a literal way.

Thomas Harrison, writing about the first waves of German expressionism in the 1910s, takes into consideration the question of subject in expressionist painting. He states:

*Recognisable in the lurid depiction of the nullifying dimensions of human existence expressionist works do have their own subject after all: the psychological and metaphysical drama of mere dwelling in the world.*<sup>24</sup>

To paraphrase Harrison, the interest in expressionist art is, through the expression, to examine the psychology and metaphysics of living and being in the world. It turns the gaze inward, into the mind of the artist. Harrison thus makes the claim that expressionist painting turns the psychological experience of the world into its subject. Thus, it must be taken into consideration that the artist is somehow present in the work – assuming their psychological expression leaves a visual trace in the paint on the picture.

Furthermore, Harrison claims that after the 1910s the approach to the concept of the psyche changed. The new view, according to him, was that historical events were inadequate

21 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 243.

22 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 243.

23 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 244.

24 Thomas Harrison. *The Emancipation of Dissonance*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 14.

in explaining the psyche or the human subject.<sup>25</sup> Because the conditions of the outer world could not explain or comply with inner intention, artists turned inward. According to Harrison, in the portraits of Egon Schiele or Oskar Kokoschka or, in the atonal music of Arnold Schönberg, this new inward approach is visualised.<sup>26</sup>

On the one hand, Harrison talks about refusing to explain the self with historical events, when, on the other hand, Gordon's sociological perspective puts emphasis on historical events resulting in a certain kind of social imagination. Indeed, Gordon begins a chapter in *Ghostly Matters* by quoting Harrison that 'personhood is complicated'.<sup>27</sup> That personhood is connected to social circumstances, such as war or the loss of a parent, both of which Elga experienced at a young age. Gordon emphasises that the ghost can be considered a symptom of that which is missing.<sup>28</sup> It usually represents loss, whether that be a loss of life or perhaps the loss of a path not taken.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1940s, Sesemann constructed paintings from colours. The artist applied the colours with powerful and expressive strokes onto the canvas, cardboard, or paper. As a side-effect of war, Sesemann possibly lacked materials and thus used (or had to use) alternatives to oil paint, such as gouache and pastel.<sup>30</sup> The materiality of the paints, their thick layers of colours, play an important role in Elga Sesemann's paintings. In trying to find answers to the question 'What haunts Elga Sesemann's paintings?' one of the first things that comes to mind are the visible traces of the long-gone artist. Signatures are another way for the artist to keep haunting their paintings. As noted by scholars, the way Sesemann signs her paintings is unusual: ELGA, with capital letters.

The expression of the brushstrokes is a reminder that the artist was, or is, present. The brushstrokes invite us into the artist's mindscape. Harrison writes that in expressionist painting matter 'comes to exude an explosive and brutal power, cohesive and destructive at once, binding as well as loosening all natural relations'.<sup>31</sup> The materials turn the artist into a spectre, lingering in the painting and frozen in time. This is among the ways that hauntology's idea of an absent presence can be thought of.

The art historian Tutta Palin talks similarly about Sesemann's expressionist self-portraits. The idea of the artist's 'self' is mirrored both in the form of expression and in the subject matter. Palin suggests that every brushstroke, each of those a sign of its making, becomes a self-portrait of the artist.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the painter acquires a kind of dual role: that of both painter and model. As Wolfgang Georg Fischer notes in considering the self-portraits of Egon Schiele: 'He [Schiele] comes before us as doer and observer, doppelgänger and loner, saint and masturbator, hermit and dandy, prisoner and Death.'<sup>33</sup> Expressionist self-portraits tend to be ruthlessly introspective, as Palin suggests.<sup>34</sup>

Lastly, in this section, I would like to consider the rather peculiar painting, *A Red Brick Building*, even though it was not included in the 'Modern Woman' exhibition. The painting is vaguely dated between 1940 and 1980 and has been made on black paper with gouache. Almost the entire pictorial plane is taken up by the subject of a train and a red brick house, meeting in the middle and vertically cut in half. It is reminiscent of René Magritte's surrealist works. Magritte's painting *Time Transfixed (La Durée poignardée, literally Ongoing Time Stabbed by a Dagger)* from 1938, depicts a steam locomotive emerging through a fireplace, with a clock on the mantelpiece. The themes alluding to the Machine Age are identifiable in

25 Harrison, *The Emancipation of Dissonance*, 15.

26 Harrison, *The Emancipation of Dissonance*, 15.

27 Harrison, *The Emancipation of Dissonance*, 15. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 5.

28 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 64.

29 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 64.

30 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 244.

31 Harrison, *The Emancipation of Dissonance*, 14.

32 Tutta Palin. *Modernin muotokuvan merkit. Kuvia 1800- ja 1900-luvuilta Taidekoti Kirpilässä*. Helsinki: Lönnberg Painot Oy, 2007, 105.

33 Wolfgang Georg Fischer. *Egon Schiele 1890-1918*. Köln: Taschen, 2004, 147.

34 Palin, *Modernin muotokuvan merkit*, 106.



**Elga Sesemann, *A Red Brick Building*, 1940–80, gouache on black paper, 63cm x 45cm**  
 Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum  
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

the symbol of the train: the experience of time in the industrial age and the new environments that it is producing.

Sesemann's thought-provoking subject matter and the slightly surrealist manner in the use of the locomotive are reminiscent of the Magritte, but the short, thick brushstrokes bring an element of expressionism to the work that is typical of Sesemann's style of painting in the 1940s. In terms of colour, the work consists of a few, strong colours. The house that dominates the right half of the painting is red and the train on the left side is black with two bright dots of bright bluish-green against a background of grey. The short brushstrokes of light grey and white create a microcosm of movement in the foreground – the effect is to create movement in opposing directions in the painting, as if the train/house is speeding up through and out of the surface, yet also completely frozen *in situ*. There is no steam coming out of the locomotive.

*A Red Brick Building* is not the only painting by Sesemann that uses the motif of a train – there is also *A Locomotive and a Woman* from 1968 and *Train*, from the same year. It is

worth mentioning that in the 1940s freight trains passed through Puistokatu on the way to the Katajanokka district of Helsinki, via the street where the Sesemanns lived.<sup>35</sup> It is likely the artist would have seen the trains from her apartment window. The changing urban environment of the early 20th century provided artists with new subjects. Instead of depicting the agrarian countryside with its picturesque views and its people, artists could now look for subjects in industrial environments, such as factories, harbours or construction sites.<sup>36</sup> The juxtaposition of the moving train with the immovable building creates tension between movement and stillness. The train can work as a kind of metaphor for movement.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to reconcile the theory of hauntology into art-historical writing. The process has been in many ways experimental. However, since I am writing this article as part of my university degree, I let myself try something quite out-of-the-box just because coming across this new way of thinking inspired me. To me, hauntology has opened a

<sup>35</sup> Information from the online biography written by Sesemann's relatives, <https://www.elgasesemann.com/> (accessed 10 October 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Petterson, 'Kaupungin ja ihmisen kuva', 88.

new way of looking at the connection between past and present. Hauntology is predominantly used in sociology and literary analysis, in which it provides a tool to talk about memory and time in certain cultural contexts. It also provides a linguistic tool to talk about something that is found in the liminal space between being and not being. I have not been trying to look for causalities between historical events and the future after the war, but rather to recognise its complicated nature.

For the purposes of clear terminology, I have used the word expressionism in the sense that art historians have used it, and applied it to describe Elga Sesemann's way of painting during the 1940s. Riitta Konttinen notes that during that decade expressionism in its various forms matured in Finnish art.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the 1940s saw a host of new artistic impressions and women artists especially came to the forefront of the Finnish art scene.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1940s Elga Sesemann began her artistic career and produced an extensive oeuvre ranging from commissioned portraits to views of the urban city. The outbreak of the war, the evacuation of her family, moving to a new city, the changing landscape and the lack of art supplies all influenced Sesemann's life. The paintings of melancholy atmospheres, such as *Street* and *Street View*, are windows inward, into the mindscape of the artist. I argue that using a hauntological framework allows us to see the materiality of the thick paint and visible brushstrokes as the absent presence of the artist.

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37 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 255.

38 Konttinen, *Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, 255.