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Cover Page Footnote
This essay emerges from, among other contexts, the research project “Art, culture, conflict: transformations of museums and memory culture in the Baltic Sea region after 1989”, funded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Stockholm. My thanks to Beátrice Joueux-Prunel and Catherine Dossin; to Anu Allas, Charlotte Bydler, Jacob Derkert, Marta Edling, Johan Hegardt, Dan Karlholm, Simon Moores, as well as the Higher Seminar in Art History and Södertörn University, and the anonymous peer reviewers.

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Exhibiting Contemporary Art in the Early 1990s Nordic-Baltic Realm

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Abstract
This article investigates exhibitions of Baltic contemporary art in the Early 1990s, that were directed towards an international audience. Notions of an art life finally freed from the heavy institutional power of the Soviet occupation has served to obscure the arrival of other international and political presences, the ones from Norden. While new Baltic art practices were widely made public in the three Baltic capitals after 1991, the fact that the highest political level of Nordic foreign policy provided an infrastructure for this, was not. “The Nordic–Baltic realm,” is here suggested as a notion of interactions between the contemporary art and foreign diplomacy, and the ability to act upon the potential of the other’s experienced “window of opportunity.”


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This essay emerges from, among other contexts, the research project ‘Art, culture, conflict: transformations of museums and memory culture in the Baltic Sea region after 1989’, funded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, Stockholm. My thanks to Béatrice Joueux-Prunel and Catherine Banzin; to Anu Allas, Charlotte Bydler, Jacob Derkert, Marta Edling, Johan Hegardt, Dan Karlholm, Simon Moores, as well as the Higher Seminar in Art History and Södertörn University, and the anonymous peer reviewers. See also note 4.
Cold War narratives where official and dissident art are set in a dichotomous relationship foster ideas of an artistic liberation thereafter. During the Soviet era, artists’ associations, under the direction of Moscow, structured the exhibition scene in the entire Soviet Union. Small pockets of independent art activity appeared in local contexts. After the three Baltic nations proclaimed their independence in 1991, there was a change of cultural system, where “a very horizontal cultural arena” emerged, where “everyone could say anything without getting punished,” as Arūnas Gelūnas has described the Lithuanian perspective. The artist’s position was still a struggle, however not at all as heroic and dramatic as within the occupied state’s strict hierarchical cultural system which, as he suggests, was paired with thrilling resistance against the same power.

The notion of an art life finally freed from the heavy institutional power of the Soviet occupation prevails and serves to obscure the circumstance that other international and political presences appeared and had influence. While new Baltic art practices were indeed made public to a large extent in the three countries and their capitals, Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, the fact that the highest political level of Nordic foreign policy provided infrastructure for this was not. This article aims to showcase this interrelationship within the 1990s Nordic-Baltic realm (a notion that I will return to), taking exhibitions of new art produced for international audiences as its departure point. I draw on theories from the field of international relations put forward by Scandinavian and historian Kazimir Musial. By doing so, I unpack some aspects of Nordic-Baltic relations within the contemporary art scene.

Assessing Simultaneous Perceptions of Opportunity

In the early 1990s, Baltic cultural activities were performed and supported by many individuals and institutions, from within and from the outside. New Baltic art was presented to an international audience through exhibitions at independent venues and new institutions in the Baltic capitals. The art was also showcased abroad in Central and Northern Europe, in exhibitions by invitation. A new generation of artists and curators experienced a momentum where new territories, identities, and opportunities could be explored. Piotr Piotrowski has suggested to extend the term “agoraphilia,” to denote a sudden, intense drive to shape public life, to perform critical and design functions for and within the social space of post-Communist Europe.

I would like to extend its meaning to include the activities in the Baltic countries and the increased level of exhibition production, as well.

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4 The Nordic-Baltic realm refers here to public relations within art and diplomacy performed between the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland) and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).

5 Art was presented to foreign audiences in a variety of ways. Exhibition productions from the Contemporary Centers of Art were shown on-site, and occasionally abroad. A few biennales focused on the region’s art. Actors from the three Baltic countries each put on approximately twenty exhibitions of Baltic art specifically in the Nordic countries and beyond during the period 1992–2000, and a number of exhibitions were additionally initiated from the Nordic side in cooperation. The considerations in this essay are resumed from this semi-open cohort of exhibition productions. I would like to thank the Estonian Centre for Contemporary Art (EKKM) and the Library of RMU in Tallinn, the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA) and National Library of Latvia in Riga as well as the Contemporary Centre of Art (CAC), the National Gallery of Art, and the Marityna Mahdydas National Library of Lithuania in Vilnius, for their kind and efficient support in localizing exhibition catalogues and documentation.

6 New Baltic art was presented to an international audience through exhibitions at independent venues and new institutions in the Baltic capitals. The art was also showcased abroad in Central and Northern Europe, in exhibitions by invitation. A new generation of artists and curators experienced a momentum where new territories, identities, and opportunities could be explored. Piotr Piotrowski has suggested to extend the term “agoraphilia,” to denote a sudden, intense drive to shape public life, to perform critical and design functions for and within the social space of post-Communist Europe.

As expressed by Lolita Jablonskiene: “Everything was suspended in a permanent Present. Culture had no relation with its Western historical analogue or Past; and the bridge to the not-too-distant Soviet Past was supressed. Rather than float with the detritus on a temporal tide, the space of the Baltic – or Baltic Time – was constructed as a buffer to the past and antechamber for the future.” In Lolita Jablonskiene, “Just an Artist? An Imaginary Exhibition Project,” in Feminism Is Still Our Name, eds. Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Nihom Shradibe (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 141.

7 As expressed by Lolita Jablonskiene: “Everything was suspended in a permanent Present. Culture had no relation with its Western historical analogue or Past; and the bridge to the not-too-distant Soviet Past was supressed. Rather than float with the detritus on a temporal tide, the space of the Baltic – or Baltic Time – was constructed as a buffer to the past and antechamber for the future.” In Lolita Jablonskiene, “Just an Artist? An Imaginary Exhibition Project,” in Feminism Is Still Our Name, eds. Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Nihom Shradibe (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 141.

The exhibitions of new Baltic art, locally and abroad, targeted foreign audiences, largely in the Nordic countries. In art historical narratives of 1990s Nordic art, the complete absence of at times important interrelationships between Nordic and Baltic individuals and institutions suggests a discursive blindness. In Swedish art historical overviews of the late twentieth century, Nordic exhibitions in the 1990s showing Baltic art—and vice versa—are neglected. In their discourse on “internationalization” of the art field, which started during the Cold War era and experienced a revival in the 1990s, other narratives have been given priority.\(^4\) In a recent analysis of the rise of the Nordic contemporary art field (1976–2016), viewed as an interplay between institutions and artists, the extensive Baltic links are omitted.\(^10\) After the fall of the Berlin Wall, new art in the former East attracted curators and museums in the West, and several exhibitions of East European art were conducted, which have been critically revised recently. Here the situatedness of Baltic art is not acknowledged and is marginally represented.\(^11\) It appears that the new art field in Northern Europe during the 1990s and its complex entanglements still need scholarly attention.\(^12\)

Within international relations and foreign diplomacy, the demise of Communism in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania signaled the beginning of a new region-building in Northern Europe. The Nordic nations—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland—saw an opportunity and necessity to redefine the Nordic region’s identity and geopolitical space of reference. They did this through the development aid they granted to the Baltic countries. Musial points to a “window of opportunity” seen by the Nordic governments at this point; in his words, by “[t]he end of the bi-polar world.”\(^13\)

This essay highlights simultaneous perceptions of spatial opportunities within the contemporary art scene and foreign diplomacy in the early 1990s. A spatial homology can be observed here, where new uncertainties and possibilities were perceived, new positions explored, resulting in translocal actions. The presence of international policymaking in the context of contemporary art was little conceded, except for acknowledgment lines in exhibition catalogues regarding the funding received. The link between the two platforms might be understood with notions from the Political Science, and in the register between the two poles of Musial’s analysis, that is, between the concepts of “benevolent assistance” and “cognitive colonization” that characterize Nordic policy toward the Baltics. The over- looking of connections between the two areas has a certain similarity with what Pierre Bourdieu has put forward regarding the denied relation between the cultural and economic fields, and a shared idea within the cultural field of art’s autonomy.\(^14\)

In this essay, the construct “Baltic nations” will be used, and I additionally suggest “the Nordic–Baltic realm” as a productive notion. Despite significant historical, cultural, and political differences between the three Baltic nations, “a set of shared contemporary art practices” simultaneously emerged after 1989.\(^15\) Additionally, they were equally targets

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\(^{12}\) After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1999 had a large representation of Baltic artists. The show’s chief curator, Bojana Pejić, declared the reason for significantly changing the working title of the exhibition, “Art of Countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” to the final one was the need to express their situatedness: “This expression does not, however, embrace the Baltic countries, which are situated neither in Central nor in Eastern Europe, but in the North.” Bojana Pejić, “The Dialectics of Normality,” in After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe, ed. Bojana Pejić and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 16. More recent projects have critically investigated notions of a transition period in contemporary art as a constructed East formed from the preconditions and desires of the West. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, eds., Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Janovská and Marcoci, eds., with Ksenia Nouril, Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe, 67–8. In these, the Baltic countries are almost absent.


\(^{15}\) Silje Herm, in “Estonia,” East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe, eds. IRWIN (London: Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, 2006), 98–207, outlines the historical similarities as well as cultural, religious, and geopolitical differences in the Baltics. East Art Map is an iconic survey of
of the Nordic countries’ public diplomacy policies through the Nordic Council of Ministers, thus setting them apart from the larger contingent of “former Eastern” bloc countries. “The Nordic-Baltic realm,” I here suggested to denote a shared space for strategies within art and foreign policy in the region, in the 1990s.

While the small Nordic countries had served more or less, as a buffer zone between the two Cold War blocs, according to Musial, positioned peripherally in relation to the larger European nations, they met the “threat of irrelevance of the post-Cold War era” with their brand of postmodern values. Defending human rights and countering climate change through sustainable development are two examples that Musial mentions, of such values.16

In short, the Nordic nations changed their foreign policy to control and shape the Baltic territories. This was in order to strengthen the Nordic region’s military security, financial development, and political influence in relation to both the former Soviet Union and wider Europe. While culture as such, as I will return to below, was considered an important factor in these strategies, contemporary art is not referred to, or put forward, in the policy documents as a specific area of activity.17

Nordic contemporary art actors, that is, curators, artists’ associations, and even cultural authorities, were expanding their territories at the time. The notion of a pan-Nordic contemporary art scene started to attract a strong international interest. A process during the 1990s, known as “the Nordic Wonder” fully manifested itself in connection with a couple of important shows in 1998, which catapulted the region to prominence in the global art world.18 At the same time, these Nordic actors identified new Baltic art as an emerging object of interest. In comparison with the low number of exhibitions of Baltic art in the Nordic countries during the decades after the Second World War, exhibition exchanges intensified from around 1992.19

Thus, the 1990s Nordic-Baltic realm was not only characterized by an intense creativity and willingness “from within” the Baltic countries to exhibit new art, but it also served as a space for Nordic artists, curators and art critics, to realize their artistic and professional ambitions. Many of the exhibition projects served as performative acts that presented new identities and relations in an emerging global art life. They constituted and occasioned the transfer of contemporary cultural praxis and ideas of postmodern culture, with the Baltics as the test bed.20

Assessing positions within the Nordic-Baltic realm serves to open up some specific aspects of post-1989 relations within the contemporary European art. While producing new exhibitions of Baltic art in the early 1990s, actors took different approaches to identity, time, and space. I follow the approach in Piotrowski’s claim that the West’s interest in putting on exhibitions of (in his case) Central European art is “obvious and political.” Turning to exhibitions organized from “within,” he asked in what way their curators wanted the art to be examined. According to him, the aim was not to challenge the power system but “rather to deconstruct a curator’s strategies in the context of lost or gained identity in what has been exhibited…”21

Below three examples of shows presenting Baltic art, curated from “without” and “within,” represent positions within the exhibition production dealt with here.22 The object of analysis is not exhibitions “as such” but rather their “curatorial

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20 Just a few examples of exhibitions of contemporary Baltic art are found in Sweden during the Cold War, among those are: Estnisk och lettisk konst, February 16–March 10, 1946, Liljevalchs konsthall, Stockholm; Estnisk konst och kultur: 35 år i Sverige, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, July 4–September 7, 1980. See also note 27.
23 See note 4.
argument,” that is, the way in which the curator, or other authors, expresses the intentions and aims of the show in the catalog’s introduction.23 The institutional circumstances in which these exhibitions were held are identified so that they will serve in the final section as the point of departure for some observations on relations between the artistic and the political.

Exhibiting Baltic Art at the End of the Bipolar World

The curatorial argument in exhibitions of new Baltic art held in the early 1990s appears to follow two discursive lines, one keen to address a shared cultural heritage and ancient history, the other more inclined to foster the future and develop new identities. In and around Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, *Baltic Sculpture 93/ Ars Baltica: Contemporary Sculpture from the Baltic Region* was staged that year.24 Besides Nordic and Baltic artists, Russian, Polish, and German sculptors participated. The curatorial introduction by Johan Pousette focuses on issues of a common past and identification within and created a “renewed consciousness of historic ties and current connections” in the Baltic Sea area.25 In another text in the catalogue, the poet Björner Torsson put forward the historical site, the medieval town of Visby with its ancient city wall as the backdrop to the exhibition, as the meeting of old and new.26 "The spirit of the site is disturbed by new, grating addresses, because the new works of art against the landscape’s background is bursting into the present, the willfulness, messages of the goings-on, on other shores.”26

The contemporary art concept “Ars Baltica” was originally introduced by a local association in Visby that had already in 1964 and 1966 presented exhibitions with artists from countries bordering the Baltic Sea.27 However in 1993, a large group of new funders stepped forward. Official funders comprising municipal, national, and Nordic sponsors, with the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs as the main sponsor, as well as private funders are found in the acknowledgment line, as already mentioned.28 The initiative would, a few years later, lead to the creation in 2001 of a permanent space for contemporary art in Visby, namely, the Baltic Art Centre. The shared Hanseatic history and the Baltic Sea as a common dominator rather than a frontier, with the medieval town of Visby serving as the home for the construction of a genius loci, were at the core of Baltic Sculpture 93/Ars. Art should infuse a zest for life and “put up rebellion, disorder, against bureaucracy and rigidity.”29

In the 1990s, identity making was a returning topic in the contemporary group shows of new Baltics art with an international target audience. A twin exhibition named *Vilnius* and *Oslo* respectively, was presented in Oslo between May 7–May 29 (Vilnius), 1994, at the Young Artists’ Society (Unge kunstneres samfund) and in Vilnius between April 30 and May 24 (Oslo) at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC).30 (Figs. 1 and 2). The

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24 Kain Tapper and Maarja Wirkkala (Finland), Irina Nakhtova (Russia), Jüri Okas (Estonia), OAJ Lars Petersson and OTO Valberg (Sweden), Jutta Grosser, Martin Blomqvist, and Godiminas Urbonas (Lithuania), Mitroslav Balka, Krysztof Bednarski, Johanna Pyyhrä (Poland), Ulrich Effer, Johannes Michler, Raffael Rheinsberg (Germany), Ingrid Cronhammar, Anita Jörgensen, Ole Vibeke (Denmark), Sissel Tolaas (Norway), and Gunilla Bandolín and Eva Löfdahl (Sweden). Catalog: *Baltic Sculpture 93/Ars Baltica: Contemporary Art Centre (CAC)*. 30 (Figs. 1 and 2). The contents of this exhibition are found in the catalog’s introduction. 23 The institutional circumstances in which these exhibitions were held are identified so that they will serve in the final section as the point of departure for some observations on relations between the artistic and the political.
25 Johan Pousette, “Introduction,” in *Ars Baltica, 5.*
Figure 1. VILNIUS. UKS (Unge Kunstneres Samfund), Oslo, 1994. Exhibition catalogue cover. Photo: National Library of Lithuania.
The Contemporary Art Centre of Vilnius

April 30th to May 24th 1994

Thorbjørn Sørensen
Bjarne Melgaard
Hege Nyborg
Katrine Skavlan
Line Wælgaard
Hanne Nielsen
Vanessa Baird

Oslo

Figure 2. OSL0. The Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, 1994. Exhibition catalogue cover. Photo: National Library of Lithuania.
exhibition publication was double-sided with two front pages. It could therefore be opened from both sides, each depicting one of the twins. The format as such is a statement of an affinity between young art from Norway and Lithuania and their respective art scenes, but it may also invite a dichotomic reading stating opposites. The director of CAC in Vilnius, Kęstutis Kuizinas, co-curated the arrangement with colleagues at the Young Artists’ Society in Oslo. The show contained installations with objects with classical sculptural forms, art works with more minimalistic features, and others using new media.

An overview of the text shows that the curatorial argument is structured in a geopolitical center–periphery model depicting Europe. It takes its point of departure in a claim that Europe’s geographical center is some 20 km outside the city limits of Vilnius.31 It presents an avant-garde position, and the ambition is to present new tendencies in Lithuanian art to a Norwegian audience while contrasting with a previous exhibition of Lithuanian “traditional art” in Norway.32 The text discusses Lithuanian art in relation to the notion of “contemporary art.” “What are, after all, the bounds of the contemporary Lithuanian art register.”33 This register covers, it appears, several aspects. First and foremost, the participants’ age—the artists are young, although some of them from the mid-generation, are accepted as they are representing actuality; experience, which here refers to young artists’ experience of international art life and new genres. Genres are another point given, namely, the artists’ ability to engage in a “simultaneous dialogue with several layers of art history/. . .in a structural way concerning the local-specificity of postsoviet [SIC] genre, as the general archetypical models of antique, renaissance or transavangarde.”34 Thus, the curatorial program here seems to localize the exhibited Lithuanian artists within the language of the international contemporary, with the regional–traditional as a scale of evaluation. The European geographical center–periphery binary is at play. At the same time, no regional reference is made to neither to Baltic–Nordic relations nor to Lithuanian–Norwegian relations, which would perhaps have been logic considering the context and the funding structure, where not just Norwegian national sources but also the Nordic information office in Vilnius were included.35 Gediminas Urbonas was one of two artists representing Lithuania at the Sao Paulo Biennale. A few years later, in 1999, Eglė Rakauskaitė and Mindaugas Navakas, would represent their country at the Venice Biennale, where the first Lithuanian pavilion was inaugurated. Thus, the regionally and Nordic-funded exhibition Vilnius shown in Oslo, and performed in the Baltic–Nordic sphere, could be understood as a manifestation of a certain bilateral position that served among stepping-stones, for Lithuanian artists on their way to establishing themselves on the global art scene.

Some discursive features of Vilnius/Oslo reoccurred the following year; in 1995, in a large exhibition in the Lithuanian capital. In Misfits: The 6th Triennial of Young Baltic Art, which showcased eleven Baltic artists, the artist’s young age was a curatorial argument.36 In June 1992, the Vilnius Palace of Art Exhibitions was renamed the Contemporary Art Centre, and this triennial was also transformed from the one founded already in 1979.37 In her curatorial statement, the curator Lolita Jablonskiene declares that the contemporary medium of this region’s actualities undoubtedly shows that the leading

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31 Kęstutis Kuizinas, ‘A Trip to Oslo,’ unnumbered.
32 The latter was represented by a show of eight painters at Gallery F 15 in Moss in 1990, possibly 8 Painters from Lithuania: F 15 Gallery, Moss, Norway (following to Gallery 3, Stockholm, 1990).
33 Kuizinas, ‘A Trip to Oslo,’ unnumbered.
34 This contextualizing by the CAC in Vilnius of contemporary art being something that has occurred since 1989 with no relation to previous art also helped rhetorically fend off the criticism of the newly established art center: Karolina Ryba/auskaite and Marcel Tomasek, “From Central Europe to the Baltics Before and After 1989: The State of Contemporary Art Canons,” Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis 94, 2019, 7.
35 See all funders in note 29.
36 Misfits: 6th Triennial of Young Baltic Art (Vilnius: CAC Vilnius, 1995). The participating artists were Peeter Allik, the artist collective 21E67 (Jan Joonas, Graps Grafs, and Pier Li), Marko Mäeama, Urmas Vilk (Estonia); Gints Gabrans, Mikēlijs Fisers, Andrs Frīdebergs, Anita Zabilevska (Lithuania); and from Academic Training Group (Giedrius Kumatzius, Mindaugas Rutavicius, and Simonas Tarydas) (Latvia). The exhibition was curated by Lolita Jablonskiene at CAC Vilnius, and the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius as well as the Tallinn Art Hall are credited in the catalog.
positions in contemporary art are occupied by young artists.\footnote{Lolita Jablonskienė, "Misfits," in Misfits, 1996, V.}

In the triennals’ next format, the one from 1998, the requirement that the artist must be young was abolished. In addition, it included art from a wider Central and Eastern European context.\footnote{On triennials in the Baltic countries, see, for example, Julia Fomina, "How to Represent the Present?" Kunstteadusklike Turumud 27, no. 1-3, 2018, 250–64, 294. The essay expands on her Curatorship of Art Exhibitions in Lithuania: Concepts and Evolution (PhD diss., Vilnius Art Academy, 2015); Kädi Talvoja, "Estonian Art's International Relations," and again, the international outlook is against a somewhat general, global, contemporary art space.

The curatorial arguments of exhibitions produced in the Baltic countries during the 1990s such as these, the international direction is clear and negotiated with help of notions of the contemporary. Although spatial ideas are involved in the meaning production, the connotations are often geographically general. Specific notions of national or collective identity or history, as we see in the Baltic 93 Sculpture in Visby, are rare in the productions “from within” such as Misfits. Instead, contemporary art is generational, referring to artists (who are young) rather than to features in the artworks. The individual's young age seems to ensure they are not tainted by a socialist past. Interestingly, this notion is linked to a strong tradition during the Cold War in the Nordic region and beyond to let traveling exhibitions of national contemporary art present “young art,” that equally attach value to the artists’ young age.\footnote{For example, Kristof Nagy, "From Fringe Interest to Hegemony: The Emergence of the Soros Network in Eastern Europe," in Globalizing East European Art Histories, eds. Beata Hock and Ana Allas (New York: Routledge, 2010); Karolina Labowicka-Dymans, "The Corporate and Market Strategies for Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe," in Lost and Found Spaces: Displacements in Eastern European Art and Society in the 1990s, eds. Beata Hock and Ana Allas (Tallinn: Estonian Society of Art Historians, 2019), 74–98. It is important to distinguish the critique of such discursive imperialism of the Soros centers from the massive attack on George Soros's legacy from today's anti-democratic and anti-feminist movements. Neil McLafflin and Shaidea Tchlapatye, "The International Circulation of Attacks and the Reputational Consequences of Local Context: Georg Soros's Difficult Reputation in Russia, Post-Soviet Lithuania and the United States," Cultural Sociology 7, no. 4, 2012, 431–46.}

This ongoing quest for identity, created by the show’s Baltic context, is addressed as a feature of the new generation, or, in Jablonskienė’s words, as “typical and somewhat fostered characteristics of new times.” Interestingly, the Baltic artists' national characteristics are here described as based on their ability to relate to international contemporary art.\footnote{See Terry Smith, What Is Contemporary Art? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Dan Kariholm, Kontemporalism: om samtidskonstens historia och framtid (Stockholm: Adv Books, 2014).}

The curatorial argument is that they are the artists of the “first wave of internationalism,” disposing of previous experiences, and not doubting contemporary art’s broadest context. Thus, the cohesiveness of this argument tends toward the contemporary, and again, the international outlook is against a somewhat general, global, contemporary art space.

During previous decades, several shows of “young artists” toured in nationally framed exhibitions across the Nordic region. See Pella Myrstener, Modernitet i rørelse: Tidligere utstillingene med internasjonalt nutida kunst i Sverige 1945-1969 (Södertörn University, forthcoming).
how contemporary art was conceptualized and manifested in large-scale contemporary art exhibitions in Lithuania in the 1990s in their “attempt to present the present.” Karolina Rybačiauskaitė and Marcel Tomášek underline that views of “contemporary art” were marked by a strong tendency of “binarism” affecting and distorting the view of the developments in Lithuanian art.

This section in its discursive approach, has discussed how the notion of “contemporary art” is negotiated within different examples of cultural transfer within the Nordic–Baltic realm. The CACs, which functioned as producers of or venues for Baltic art, were among the venues that targeted the art at the Nordic art scene. In the next section, it will be discussed how the Nordic authorities additionally established new, institutions parallel to them.

**Contemporary Art as a Way of Nordic Internationalism?**

In what has been labeled a “register of cultural safari,” curators and art critics came to post-Soviet countries searching for new art to present in exhibitions around Europe. When arriving in Tallinn, Vilnius, or Riga, foreign curators, editors, and artists were, as a rule, “hosted” by CAC staff members who helped set up tours to artists’ studios and provide material on artists for the selection process for potential future shows. While the Hungarian philanthrope Georg Soros’ Open Society of the Eastern Cultural Life had established eighteen centers for contemporary art throughout Eastern Europe, a network of local institutions in the field of Nordic foreign policy was created by the Nordic Council of Ministers. In the early 1990s, three Nordic Information Offices (NIOs) were opened in the Baltic countries (and additionally one in St. Petersburg and one in Kaliningrad). Before discussing their impact, these offices and their political function need to be framed.

The Nordic Council of Ministers, founded in 1971, took new steps in the Baltics after 1989 that were consistent with its promotion of the Nordic region on the global market. The efforts pursued by the Nordic Council of Ministers in its 1991 session to include the Baltic countries in its extended territory were packaged according to the idea that Baltic citizens had close cultural ties with the Nordic countries. It was stated that “the Nordic cultural community should be extended to include the Baltic States. The exchange of information should be intensified. Media cooperation should be developed. Cultural networks should be created.”

Thus, culture was meant to serve as a “bridge-builder” between the Nordic region and the Baltic countries; culture should come first and pave the way for further cooperation. The ultimate aim served political power; Nordic support in the Baltic States was seen as crucial to military security due to the vacuum created in the region after the Soviet military withdrawal. But more precisely, how was this influence through culture meant to work?

In her study of the discourse on “Nordic culture” in Nordic policy, the historian Anna Kharkina has detected a pattern of political instrumentalization in the Nordic policy programs in the Baltics. The notion of Nordic culture was, as Kharkina claims, vague and therefore served well as an empty signifier in the new unstable political situation. From 1989, the Nordic countries secretly sought direct contact with cultural circles in the three states, thus bypassing the official bilateral route via Moscow. The next step came in early 1991, when the Nordic Ministry Council decided to establish NIOs in the Baltic capitals to officially serve as channels for cultural relations with the three countries.

The topics for the events held at the NIOs—the seminars, conferences, and courses—were, for example, Nordic languages, the preservation of art objects, children and young people’s policy, environmental protection, and democracy. The subfield

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48 Rybačiauskaitė and Tomášek, “From Central Europe to the Baltics,” 60–82.
52 As well as in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, Ibid.
of contemporary art is not mentioned in official documents but appears, as I have noted, to have been activated locally by some NIO officials. In the exhibition catalogs, the NIOs repeatedly appear in the acknowledgment lines. Like the CACs, they also worked to support and offer a helping hand to those Nordic curators and artists who had started to travel across the Baltic to study the local scene. It is hard to establish whether the political NIOs started to engage in contemporary art when they saw the energy of the local art scenes or whether Nordic and Baltic actors first approached these offices while looking for funding and infrastructure for their projects.

In the late 1980s, a new interest in the young Baltic art scene had begun to grow in the Nordic countries, after a long period when exhibitions from neighboring Nordic countries had by far and away dominated international cultural exchanges. Projects started to appear. As for example, founded in 1985, Rauma Biennale Balticum, Finland, would feature contemporary art from the Baltic Sea region in all its exhibitions (1985–2016). In 1989, the exhibition Struktur/Metafysik, which presented nineteen Estonian artists, was produced by the art museum of the Finnish city of Pori. It then traveled to exhibition spaces in Helsinki, Rovaniemi, and the German city of Kiel. This was typically followed by a tour of Sweden under the production of the government agency Swedish Traveling Exhibitions (Riksutställningar).

In 1986, a new art journal, entitled Siksi: The Nordic Art Review, had been launched by the Nordic Art Centre, an important hub on the island of Sveaborg right outside Helsinki, financed by the Nordic Ministry Council. At the suggestion of Siksi’s Finnish editors a few years later, issue number 2 in 1990 was devoted to Baltic art in its entirety. “The Baltic states, the Nordic countries and the whole Baltic region” had, according to the editorial comment, over the millennia “grown into an organic whole,” a space now timely to reconnect to after decades of Soviet rule and of disconnections, they argued. The issue presented interviews and presentations of Baltic artists as well as reports from visiting art travelers. The issue’s overall message dovetailed with notions of Nordic–Baltic region-building. This may necessarily be a sign of the successful instrumentalization of art by the Nordic Council of Ministers for Culture, but it signals simultaneous perceptions of the situation in the Baltic nations.

In autumn 1994, Sweden hosted the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Stockholm, one of the most important international arts networks. It highlighted themes such as “A global perspective on ethnicity,” “Body,” and “Breakdown of artistic systems.” However, although addressing global issues and pressing political matters facing the West and the Third World, namely, the Balkan War, Islamism, the conflict in Palestine, and the war in Rwanda, the congress did not focus on Nordic–Baltic relations.

However, the situation in the Baltics was considered in a lecture by the Estonian art critic and curator Ants Juske. He argued that Estonian artists, as things now stood, had to choose one of three paths: trying to commercialize traditional art as profitably as possible or trying to maintain their privileges as professors or “merited artists.” The third choice was to try to “adapt to the elite trends of [SIC] contemporary western art world.” Juske stated that the conflict facing the artist was between reshaping Estonian art and at the same time making it similar to that of Europe—or “staying local.” While the notion of contemporary art was not addressed in his talk,
Looking more closely at the 1994 AICA in Stockholm one finds that projects on Nordic-Baltic cultural transfer were one of the side activities. Visitors to the AICA conference in Stockholm, as well as the representatives of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art and other actors on the contemporary art scene in Europe, received personal invitations to Vilnius and the conference “Finnish, Swedish and Lithuanian Stereotypes from a Postmodern Perspective.” It was arranged in connection with the presentation in Vilnius of *Prejudices – Ennakkoluloja*, a show displaying Finnish and Swedish contemporary art that had already been traveling around the Nordic countries under the auspices of Swedish Traveling Exhibitions and arranged by, among others, this government agency and the NIO in Vilnius.59

The NIOs’ role was officially to promote culture, while more importantly they were involved in secret high-level meetings between Nordic and Baltic politicians. They therefore served as an important political platform at a time when direct bilateral meetings with the Baltic nations were a delicate matter. The connection, again, between the two functions was blurred. During his tenure, the young director of the NIO in Vilnius, Anders Kreuger, became heavily involved in the contemporary art scene, which from then on would become his career field. He was deeply involved in many of the exhibitions and activities in Lithuania and neighboring countries. However, when he later looked back upon this time he clearly remembered what his employers, the Nordic Ministry Council, expected of him:

> My mission could be described as future-oriented. I was to try and make its [Vilnius’] people compatible with ‘us,’ the more fortunate and evolved civilization across the Baltic Sea. Clearly this was the way to go for a new and poor nation appearing from out of nowhere, my employers would have thought.60

The instrumentalization of culture, including contemporary art, in developing the Baltic nations seems to have been a clear mission for the NIOs. The envisaged future inclusion of the Baltic states in the Nordic Council of Ministers was preceded by their becoming EU members in 2004. This marked the end of the particular Nordic-Baltic version of the transition period during which higher political powers found reason to support the “agoraphilia” of the contemporary art scenes. The artists, curators, and editors were engaged in producing exhibitions and maintaining a critical cultural dialog within the Nordic–Baltic realm. At the further end of the decade the opening of the Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1997 and of the Lithuanian and Latvian pavilions in 1999, and similar actions intended to serve the purpose of, among other things, connecting Baltic art to the Western art world in a wider sense.

In the sphere of public diplomacy, the concept of “adjacent internationalism,” coined in 2006 by Annika Bergman, is presently established as a distinctive Nordic–Baltic phenomenon.61 It refers to diplomatic actions normatively driven and based on geographical proximity, but also on social-democratic rather than neoliberal ideology. It was traced back to both embedded patterns of Nordic cooperation and the Nordic tradition of global as well as small-state solidarity, which was now transferred to the regional level.62 Mary Hilson has identified that the interest was rather one-sided; in short, being incorporated in the European Union, and not "Norden," was, in fact, the main goal for Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.63 Kazimierz Musial has

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59 Juske, “The Limits of Art,” 94.
60 John Peter Nilsson and Tom Sandqvist, eds., *Fördomar – Ennakkoluloja* (Stockholm: Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, 1994). The exhibition was produced by Swedish Travelling Exhibitions and the Artists’ Association of Finland. Sandqvist worked for Swedish Travelling Exhibitions as an in-house curator and Nilsson as an art critic. Swedish Travelling Exhibitions produced other Nordic-Baltic exhibitions projects in 1994, such as, for example, Kood-Eks, distributed over a few sites in Tallinn, including Codex (by Ann-Sofi Siden, photographs and videos) and Störning (Disturbance, photo-based feminist art).
62 Ibid., 73.
proposed the Bourdieuan concept of “symbolic violence” to describe public relations within the Nordic–Baltic realm in the 1990s.\(^{64}\) He suggests that it entailed targeted investment strategies (economic power) that eventually introduced new norms (created dispositions) in the Baltic States. According to him, the assumed civilizational achievements of the allegedly superior Western standards gained from this cooperation made the Baltic actors readily accept the infusion of local institutions with Nordic norms and practices. The balance within the cooperation was affected by the use of English language, the lingua franca of the Western civilization (which at that time still was better mastered by the Nordic population than the Baltic one), and was, above all, based on a huge disparity in economic capital.

A number of further questions opens. What role did Nordic political interventions play in the long run for the institutionalization of the contemporary Baltic art scene? Should these interventions be understood as consistent with Nordic welfare policy measures, as the harsh instrumentalization of the building of military security, or as falling within the neoliberal framework of building financial structures? The presence in the Nordic–Baltic realm of governmental authorities such as Swedish Traveling Exhibitions, something which needs further investigation, could well indicate that an adjacent internationalism was performed in the cultural field, a benevolent assistance from the Swedish side one could gather, to help implement skills such as exhibitions production modes and of notions of “contemporary art”.

Implications of the exercise of symbolic power from the Nordic nations, in the context of the contemporary art scene in the Baltics, still need to be assessed. The eager to cooperate in arts in the Nordic–Baltic realm came from both sides. What this essay and its study of the exhibitions created in this context have stated, is the ability of not only Baltic vis-à-vis Nordic actors but of cultural actors vis-à-vis the political power to act upon the potential of the other’s experienced “window of opportunity.”

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\(^{64}\) Musial, “Benevolent Assistance and Cognitive Colonisation,” 257–82.