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echo gone wrong

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A Nordic-Baltic Editing Trip Across the Gulf of Finland

February 7, 2025
Author Marion Bouvier-Lewerenz

To the blue skies of Tallinn. Photo by Marion Bouvier-Lewerenz

A travel report from the Arts and Culture Magazine Publishers Forum's network activities in Helsinki and Tallinn. The Forum is a network connecting contemporary art and culture magazine publishers in the Baltic and Nordic countries: A Shade Colder *(Estonia),* Artnews.lt *and* Echo Gone Wrong *(Lithuania),* EDIT *(Finland),* Kunstkritikk *(the Nordics),* Art in Iceland *(Iceland) and* WunderKombinats *(Latvia). The trip took place on 19-22 November 2024. The participants in the Forum were Vitalija Jasait?, Danut? Gambickait?, Keiu Krikmann, Rosa Kuosmanen, Viivi Poutiainen, Sanna Lipponen, Eva Lín Vilhjalmsdottir, Hólmar Hólm, Mariann Enge and Elina Kempele.*

The network aims to continue and establish new and close working relationships between publishers and writers, to better disseminate critical writing and artistic creation in the region, and to share knowledge and experience about working practices, in order to tackle the challenges of

cultural publishing, and look for solutions together, highlighting and supporting emerging voices.

Travelling as an art critic, along with ten editors and publishers of art magazines from Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Iceland, could easily be a dream or a nightmare. After all, (art) publishers tend to have a reputation for big egos and possibly snobbishness. On the other hand, being able to attend several exhibitions over the course of three days in November 2024 and discuss all artsy things with ten people from different backgrounds who precisely love to analyse, decorticate, criticise and praise all things cultural sounded exciting to me. Not to mention the geographical variety of backgrounds, which always makes things more interesting, especially considering that the connection between the Nordic and Baltic countries became a red thread through our conversations. As a French person living in Norway, I love to see how the Nordic/Baltic ties play out in the contemporary world, between historical antagonisms, shared struggles and cultural (mis)understandings. There is often as much that divides these countries as there is that unites them, which makes the dialogue between them fascinating to follow.

The reason for me joining this trip was to take part in this budding network of art editors and critics as a writer, with the larger aim of the Forum to diversify the pool of critics and expand the network. I found this a noble and useful mission. So I accepted my fly-on-the-wall position, watching the network grow in front of my eyes, listening to, and participating in, rather unanimous discussions about the state of art publishing in the region.

From Helsinki's snowstorm… Photo by Marion Bouvier-Lewerenz

Visit to the Amos Rex museum in Helsinki. Photo by Danutė Gambickaitė

At this point, I should say that the magazines we are talking about are all independent, high quality, and low funding, with the exception of Estonia's *A Shade Colder*, which won a government grant competition to be published for the next few years. The lack of public and private funding was quite naturally a big topic of conversation, as printed publications have been impacted massively by the decline of printed magazine and newspaper sales, and online magazines face the dilemma of putting articles behind a paywall to secure some revenue, but thereby limiting access, or going for free content, which in turn requires alternative funding. Most of the editors around me had other jobs, at art centres, cultural institutions or writing for other newspapers, to pay the bills. Recruiting writers was another topic, as the pay is low and the good old days of 'I would publish an article for free for the sake of the publication's reputation and associated glory' are long gone. Norway was collectively voted as the best country in terms of funding for art publications, although *Kunstkritikk*, the Nordic magazine with its main office in Oslo, has also been hit by the difficult times.

During a meeting with Maria Arusoo, the director of the Center For Contemporary Art Estonia, there was talk of how private foundations make a huge difference in funding art and what we could call the free press, although most media outlets are still state funded, and I learnt that in Finland it's the elevator manufacturer Kone that distinguishes itself by its generous contribution to the arts through the Kone Foundation created in 1956.

Even more interestingly, Arusoo told us of the instrumental role the Soros Foundation played in the Baltic, and how it created the CCA in 1992. George Soros is a Hungarian-American self-made financier and philanthropist who was born in 1930 and made his fortune primarily in hedge funds and currency speculation. In 1979 he laid the grounds for the Soros Foundation, which initially sponsored scholarships for Black South Africans under apartheid. It then developed into the Open Society Foundations, established 1984, which aim to promote democracy, human rights and education.

The OSF played an active role in the Baltic States at the fall of the Iron Curtain, by notably funding civil society organisations, promoting free elections, and supporting independent media. The OSF also pushed for the revival of cultural identity post-Soviet rule, not only with the creation of the CCA, but also for example with the Open-Society Fund-Lithuania, of which the mission is to make Lithuania open to the world's heritage of culture and knowledge, and the Baltic-American Partnership Fund (BAPF), which has provided multiple grants to art initiatives and institutions.

In this vein, it was very interesting to hear Maria Arusoo, as well as Keiu Krikmann, the editor of ***A Shade Colder*** (published by the CCA), discuss the identity crisis that the art scene in Estonia went through in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They described the energy and appeal shrouding Estonia and the Baltic States in the aftermath of the Cold War, with Western investors and art collectors rediscovering this part of the world and proclaiming it exotic and therefore of great interest. But as the newness factor faded and prices increased, making Estonia much more similar to its Western neighbours, Arusoo summarised: 'We are not exotic enough any more, nor cheap enough.' The Latvian and Lithuanian editors nodded approvingly.

The Finns were clearly sympathetic to their Baltic counterparts when it came to Soviet domination, as Finland was a grand duchy in the Russian Empire from 1809 until its independence in 1917. And that history has left a bitter mark. As the editor Viivi Poutiainen told me, it is still not a good idea to joke about Lenin in the presence of older Finns. However, the revival of the cultural identity in Finland took place a century ago, and the geographical position and ties of Finland to Scandinavia make it more steadily attractive to tourists, art audiences and investors.

Photo by Sanna Lipponen

This dissimilarity, between Finland's stable and self-assured (albeit darkly cynical) status, and the Baltic's ongoing struggle for cultural differentiation and promotion, felt quite visible in the exhibitions and institutions we visited. In Tallinn, there was a clear DIY, edgy, strong energy oozing from places as established as the CCA, and as punk as the EKKM (Center For Contemporary Art Estonia). In Tallinn, we met editors from ***Müürileht*** (Aleksander Tsapov), ***kunst.ee*** (Andreas Trossek) and ***Sirp*** (Juhan Raud); the three were all tired-looking men who obviously worked too much for too little pay,

but they shared the same desire to stimulate free expression, to celebrate critical thinking, and to challenge the status quo. The EKKM in particular made for an energising visit, with its artist-run and queer-punk vibes backed by solid curation, as evidenced by the arresting show on display when we visited, the solo exhibition by the avant-garde artist Ene-Liis Semper (more on this later). On the other side of the Gulf of Finland, we saw lavish contemporary art exhibitions in Helsinki, noticeably backed by big money, but there was a certain lethargy and conformity that is reminiscent of the Scandinavian art scene in general.

Nonetheless, big money and Scandinavian aesthetics can still rhyme with excellent exhibitions. That was proven by the solo show by the Palestinian-Danish artist Larissa Sansour at Amos Rex in the heart of Helsinki, Amos Rex being another example of the main role of foundations, as it is largely funded by the Amos Anderson Art Museum Foundation.

The new location of Amos Rex in Lasipalatsi, a 'cave' turned into a vast underground modular art space, seemed to have been made for Sansour's exhibition: the cavernous high-ceilinged labyrinth led the audience along seven video and installation works, for a combined duration of 92 minutes, retracing Sansour's exploration of trauma, memory and speculative futures.

The technical qualities of the installation were splendid, with the very high-quality (and expensive) audio and video set-up creating a perfectly immersive environment for Sansour's stunning cinematic video works. In addition to the carefully crafted videos which, frankly, left me enthralled, I should also mention the installation *Monument for Lost Time* (2019). As I rounded the corner to find it, the massive black orb seemed to jump out from the darkness of the exhibition hall, and as I moved to face it from different angles, it looked as if it was eerily returning my gaze. The five-metre sphere is composed of fiberglass and steel, and coated with a deep black pigment, which gives it a void-like appearance. It was both a captivating and sensual experience to be in the presence of this vision of space, installed on a floor comprised of hand-painted tiles crafted by artisans in Nablus (West Bank, Palestine).

Photo by Viivi Poutiainen

Back to Tallinn: we witnessed another striking exhibition, also a solo exhibition, also by a female artist, and also impressive in its scenography and use of space, evoking personal and collective trauma; but the comparison ends here. The solo show by Ene-Liis Semper at the EKKM is rough, at times uncomfortable, and radically avant-garde, even to this day, when it sometimes feels that everything has been said and done. It is never provocative for the sake of it, but rather uncompromising, revealing still-pervasive gender norms and body constraints, dealing blows to our consumerist and commercialised society, but also using strong visual elements to question our psychological experience of our surroundings. The artist and the curating team used the building to its fullest, placing Semper's works in the nooks and crannies of the historically rich building. Indeed, the EKKM is a not-for-profit organisation that offers free entry to its museum, and which is housed in a former heating plant (Tallinn Old Power Station) that it first squatted in before being officially allowed by the municipality to use it.

These were the highlights of the trip, to which I can add a memorable snow-slush-storm that hit us on our first (and only) day in Helsinki, which gave way to a beautiful blue sky and crisp air as we crossed by ferry to Tallinn. (Was the Weather Goddess trying to tell us something?)

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The Matter of Sound. A conversation with the Artist Elena Laurinavičiūtė

February 17, 2025
Author Banga Elena Kniukštaitė

Elena Laurinavic iu te . Photo by Mika Savic iu te

Ceramics is a timeless medium. To see, or perhaps to touch, art are the first associations that come to mind for the average person. However, in the age of contemporary art, the boundaries between sensory experiences are becoming increasingly blurred, influenced by the choice of medium, its flexibility, and at times, its (im)materiality. I discuss the conceptual nature of artistic creation, the synthesis of sound and clay, and the allure of this medium, with the artist and ceramicist Elena Laurinavi?i?t? (b. 1993).

BEK: Let's begin with a seemingly simple question. You first studied psychology and later pursued a master's degree in ceramics at Vilnius Academy of Art. The transition from a humanities background to an artistic field is fascinating in itself. But what's even more intriguing is that you've been engaged with ceramics for a long time. Why did you gravitate toward this particular medium? Why not, for example, metalwork?

EL: It's difficult to pinpoint exactly why I chose ceramics, but I believe I was drawn to its plasticity. Clay is a material that allows for highly intuitive work, almost like extending the movement of one's hand through space. When starting a piece, one doesn't necessarily need a preconceived plan: clay is responsive, adaptable, and reacts to even the slightest touch, making every action immediately tangible. This brings an element of playfulness and spontaneity to the creative process.

Hand-moulding with clay has a deeply therapeutic effect: it is a process that demands full presence in the moment, attunement to sensations, and a slow, deliberate approach. It is akin to meditation through movement: soft clay yields under pressure, responding to the slightest touch, and in this

interaction with the material, a certain inner satisfaction emerges. At the same time, clay remains alive until the moment it is fired: it can be reshaped, reformed and adjusted in search of the most fitting expression. Perhaps it is precisely this freedom and the ability to experience the creative process through physical action that drew me so strongly to ceramics.

It is this element of unpredictability, and the constant possibility of reshaping a piece, that makes ceramics so fascinating to me. Why not metal? Metal is far more rigid and static; working with it requires an entirely different kind of energy. Clay, on the other hand, allows for flexibility, both in the literal and figurative sense.

Elena Laurinavičiūtė, 'Soundscrapers', 2024, ceramic sculptures, cooling fans. 'JCDecaux Award 2024: Fall', Sapieha Palace, Vilnius, 2024. Photo: Alanas Gurinas

BEK: Your work Soundscrapers *won the audience choice award in the JCDecaux Prize competition. The piece explores the synthesis of sound and materiality, utilising porous clay figures with embedded fans. Could you elaborate on what inspired you to create this connection between sound and clay? And how does your work relate to the concept of liminality expressed in the exhibition?*

EL: My interest in the relationship between clay and sound developed gradually. Initially, I discovered that the ceramic-making process is filled with fascinating auditory experiences that often go unnoticed. For instance, freshly fired glazed pieces emit delicate crystalline sounds, barely audible clicks, as the glaze cools and cracks. It's as if these sounds capture the material's memory, forming an acoustic landscape of its transformation. I also observed that unglazed, porous clay objects begin to 'chirp' when submerged in water, as air bubbles escape from their pores. These unexpected discoveries became my ***eureka*** moment: I realised that ceramics hold immense sonic potential, which I wanted to explore and incorporate into my artistic practice.

This led to a series of experiments, often driven by chance. Working with clay, I allowed myself to wander, to explore, and to discover without the immediate need for rationalisation. A significant source of inspiration came from my friends working in sound art: their practices encouraged me to rethink how ceramics and acoustics could intersect. I became increasingly intrigued by how material could function not only as a visual element but also as part of an auditory experience. Eventually, I started researching historical examples of ceramic wind instruments and their sound production mechanisms. These explorations naturally led to the idea of creating sculptures in which sound is generated not through traditional impact or resonance, but through airflow: this is how *Soundscrapers* came to life.

The concept of liminality in *Soundscrapers* operates on multiple levels. First and foremost, the interaction between sound and matter itself is liminal: intangible sound takes on a physical form through the clay structures that modulate it. This idea also manifests in the dialogue between past and present. The piece reflects on the history of the Šnipiškės district in Vilnius, a place where the ceramics industry flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries. Bricks, tiles and other clay artefacts that were once fundamental to the city's architecture have now become fragmented remnants of history, while the district itself has turned into a site of rapid urbanisation. My work is not a direct historical reconstruction but rather a conversation between this past and the present. The ceramic objects are connected not only with the old brickworks but also with the contemporary soundscape of the city: the persistent urban noise, the transitions between quiet and loud spaces, between structure and transformation. It is a space between what *was* and what *is.*

BEK: Do you think Soundscrapers *resonated with the audience largely due to its interactive element? If we consider it, sound is inherently interactive: you cannot simply not hear it unless external factors intervene.*

EL: I do believe that interactivity was one of the key factors that made *Soundscrapers* appealing to the audience. People enjoy experiencing art not only visually but also through other senses: sound creates a physical engagement, enveloping the viewer and becoming unavoidable. As you pointed out, sound is a sensation that cannot be 'switched off' as easily as an image: it exists in space and affects us even when we are not consciously focused on it.

In my installation, viewers had the ability to turn the sound off, but at the same time, someone else could turn it back on. This interaction created a certain dynamism: the installation was not a static object but a shifting soundscape, shaped by the actions of those engaging with it. I think this interactivity encouraged the audience to spend more time with the work, exploring it not only with their eyes but also through listening, observing how the sound emerged and evolved depending on the space and their own participation.

Elena Laurinavičiūtė, ‘Soundscrapers’, 2024, ceramic sculptures, cooling fans. ‘JCDecaux Award 2024: Fall’, exhibition view, Sapieha Palace, Vilnius, 2024. Photo: Alanas Gurinas

BEK: Correct me if I’m wrong, but I assume that not all of your works have been rooted in purely experimental concepts, such as the relationship between sound and ceramics. It seems like, at some point, you felt a certain impulse to dive into conceptual depth and explore (un)defined boundaries. What led you in this direction? What distinctive, unique qualities do you seek to realise in your work?

EL: At the beginning of my artistic practice, my work was more focused on traditional ceramic objects. However, over time, I started looking for ways to push the conventional boundaries of this medium. I became increasingly drawn to dynamic, performative and installation-based forms that engage not only the visual but also the auditory and spatial aspects of experience. This gradually led to my interest in exploring sound through clay, not just as an inherent property of ceramics but as a medium for artistic expression in its own right.

I perceive sound sculptures as forms that directly shape the sounds they produce: their size, structure and internal cavities determine their acoustic qualities. I believe I followed my curiosity, and it was precisely that curiosity that led me to a pivotal creative breakthrough, which ultimately shaped the trajectory of my artistic practice.

The fusion of two disciplines, ceramics and sound art, allows me to place my work in a broader artistic context, opening up new and unconventional ways to approach creation. This not only expands the perceptual field of my works but also enables them to be integrated into diverse spaces and settings where traditional ceramics would not typically exist.

BEK: You explore the relationship between sound and space while simultaneously revitalising the sonic heritage of clay whistles, using ceramics to bridge past and present. What elements in your work suggest this ‘bridge’ through time?

EL: When creating sound sculptures, I draw inspiration from ancient clay whistles, studying their acoustic legacy and reinterpreting it to fit contemporary contexts. As historical objects, whistles retain their sonic nature, yet by integrating modern technologies such as electromechanics, they acquire a new dynamism and tell different stories. Fans and other mechanical components allow for sound manipulation, giving it a contemporary form and tension.

Elena Laurinavic iu te . Photo by Liepa Grušaitė

BEK: Do you view your sound sculptures more as independent, sound-emitting entities, or as interactive instruments? Or is their essence in being material objects embedded with a conceptual layer of sound?

EL: My sound sculptures are, first and foremost, material objects embedded with a conceptual layer of sound. They are three-dimensional bodies that serve as mediators, revealing the invisible and intangible movement of air. In my work, sound is not an end in itself: it emerges from the interaction between form, air, and the human presence. The sculptures do not generate sound on their own; rather, they transmit air vibrations that we perceive as sound.

At the same time, my works are not instruments in the traditional sense, although some can be actively used in performances. I am particularly interested in the threshold between object and sound source, between sculptural form and acoustic experience. What fascinates me is how sound alters our perception of materiality, how the hardness of clay can convey the flexibility of air, and how form can influence what we hear.

Thus, I see my works in a dual way: on one hand, as independent, sound-emitting entities, and on the other, as tools that reveal the imperceptible processes of the environment. My focus is not only

on the sound itself but also on the relationships between objects, space, and the observer, who often becomes an active participant in the piece.

BEK: To conclude, I'd like to invite you to reflect: would you consider incorporating other media into your future works, even those not necessarily related to ceramics?

EL: Ceramics is my primary medium. I have been working with it for several years now, and I can say that I am gradually beginning to understand it: I can shape it as I wish, and it responds to my intentions. Yet, there is still so much to refine and learn. Technically, I feel I have only scratched the surface, which keeps this medium full of discoveries for me.

Although I am a ceramicist, I do not rule out the possibility of using other media. For instance, some of my experimental objects seem to call for representation in video format. At times, I perform with my sculptural pieces, playing the experimental ceramic sound objects that I create. In realising my ideas, I have also incorporated electromechanics into my practice: I have learned to solder and construct simple mechanical components. For me, it is important not only to acquire new skills, but also to execute as much of the work myself as possible. This approach grants me creative freedom and a deeper connection with the piece.

In the future, I may develop ideas that require different media to be fully realised. They might be entirely unrelated to ceramics, or they might still heavily rely on it, it all depends on the creative process and my discoveries along the way. I may naturally come across other materials that captivate me, but at this moment I do not know what they might be. My creative satisfaction comes from embracing the unknown, so I remain open to new ideas.

Feelings Unfelt Elsewhere. The exhibition ‘NSRD: Information about a Transformed Situation’ at the Radvila Palace Museum of Art

February 20, 2025
Author Jurij Dobriakov

Exhibition view, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

The Radvila Palace Museum of Art, one of the flagship branches of the Lithuanian National Museum of Art, has a prominent strain dedicated to historical overviews of unofficial or dissident art in its exhibition agenda. The most recent show, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, curated by Māra Traumane and Māra Žeikare of the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, is a vivid example of that. Yet it is not your regular exhibition of underground art, as its sheer multitude of layers and aspects is almost overwhelming, and resists being contained in a familiar consistent narrative of ‘silent’ opposition to the authoritarian system.

Built around the diverse activities of the masterminds behind the Latvian music and art group NSRD (Nebijušu sajūtu restaurēšanas darbnīca or Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings), Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš, and their various fellow-travellers, the lush display (credit to the architect Gabrielė Černiavskaja) is bold, and occasionally looks like an avant-garde Utopia come true. But who are the recipients of the information transmitted by the exhibition? This question has stuck with me since visiting the show, and has also led me to ponder some related concerns, namely, where does the NSRD stand in relation to historical (Western) avant-garde, and happening or action-oriented art groups active around the same time (the late 20th century) in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the neighbouring republic of Lithuania. Fragmentary insights related to these questions may shed a light on the local socio-political differences in the various countries of the socialist bloc, and about the ties (or lack of them) between those countries’ unofficial art milieus.

What feelings were unfelt where, and can they be restored in a different place and context?

Exhibition view, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

Exhibition view, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

Interest in 20th-century art groups in general seems to be on the rise recently, and even the seemingly all-too-familiar subject of Surrealism has been given a thoroughly updated and expanded reading in 'The Subterranean Sky', a display of historical and contemporary works at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2024 dedicated to the centenary of André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto. While the NSRD is perhaps not a direct descendant of historical Surrealism, some of the avenues of Lediņš and Boiko's psychoactive explorations, particularly their literary output, such as the 1977–1978 novel ***ZUN***, seem kindred to it in their reliance on absurdity, automatism, non-linearity and paradox. On the surface, the universe of the NSRD looks like a bright, if somewhat weird, place, but the breath of the uncanny can be felt beneath the surface throughout.

Moreover, what can be pointed out as a shared trait of Lediņš and Boiko's oeuvre, and that of the classic Surrealists, as well as later artists they influenced, is a penchant for mystification, myth-making and psychedelic occultism. Many of the Latvian artists' documented individual and collective actions involving their close associates like Inguna Rubene and Imants Žodžiks, such as the periodical situationist walks along the railway tracks to the secluded neighbourhood of Bolderāja, or eclectic multi-media stage performances, are ritualistic by nature and are marked by a kind of post-industrial esotericism that brings them close to the 1970s British music and performance collective COUM Transmissions, who were themselves heavily influenced by Surrealism and Dada, among other things. Besides, the fact that Lediņš himself is often perceived as something more of a legend than a real-life individual testifies to the efforts that went into the creation of his obscure persona, not to mention the fictional characters populating the semantic forest of the NSRD, like that of Dr Eneser, Boiko's alter ego.

While Surrealist and Dadaist artists often focused on the primordial and irrational, they were arguably also keen on observing and reflecting on the heavily mediated nature of industrial modernity, and thus fully appropriated the media of photography, film and print that defined their turbulent era. This is another aspect that allows us to draw a parallel between these historical precedents and the dream universe of the NSRD. The latter is also very media-conscious: it is filled with tape players, synthesisers, cameras, computers and other gear emblematic of its times, and can easily be called an uncredited precursor of the new media culture movement that was to develop in Latvia in the 1990s and 2000s with initiatives like the E-LAB centre for electronic arts and media, later revamped as RIXC. The aesthetic of the NSRD even has some echoes of the 1960s and 1970s Nove Tendencije exhibitions in Zagreb, although it eschews its geeky academicism.

For this reason, another similarly unruly and intermedial analogy from the same tumultuous decade of the 1980s comes to mind: Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst. Fittingly, in the summer of 2024, an exhibition entitled 'Ausstellung! Laibach Kunst' was on show at the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana as a kind of homage or reincarnation of two one-evening exhibition-concerts held at the same venue in 1982 and 1983. The specific brand of provocative industrial-themed avant-garde, with ample borrowings from the spectacle aesthetic of totalitarian regimes, that Laibach actively exploited in their visual production can be recognised in the cold brutalist setting of the NSRD's installation and performance that was part of the 1988 exhibition 'Riga – Lettische Avantgarde' in West Berlin. This unprecedented showcase of underground Latvian artists was brokered by the Latvian émigré Indulis Bilzens, a friend of Lediņš, and organised by Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, earlier headed by another legendary Latvian expatriate and one of the Fluxus pioneers, Valdis Āboliņš. A year before, in 1987, Bilzens had also contributed to the NSRD's week-long performative First Exhibition of Approximate Art in Riga, by bringing in Maximilian Lenz, a pioneer West German DJ (or 'record artist', as he was dubbed at the time) who would later become known as Westbam.

Exhibition view, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

These facts bring us back to the issue of the (non-)simultaneity of the cultural scenes in the late Soviet-era Baltic. In a sense, the various projects of Lediņš and Boiko appear to have been ahead of their time. What similar phenomena can be found in that period in Lithuania, where the exhibition devoted to the NSRD is now taking place? Most manifestations of intermedial, performative art forms came about here towards the late 1980s, with newly formed artist groups of varying visibility, such as Post Ars (Kaunas), Green Leaf (Vilnius, later reinvented as Jutempus, with a focus on new media and a different set of members), and Doooooris (Klaipėda), each trying in their own way to unhinge creative practice from the officially sanctioned and established forms of expression. Young composers, too, teamed up with visual artists, and organised several unofficial happening festivals in the town of Anykščiai, starting with ‘AN–88’.

But there was nothing quite like the NSRD. Lithuanian art groups were often focused on ecological issues as a metaphor for the repressive regime’s devastating impact on not only the natural landscape, but also on the very mental environment of the people it imprisoned, and these collectives’ performances and happenings often took place outside cities and galleries. This was also partly due to censorship, whose reach did not extend so far to the periphery, while official institutions were often off limits for their provocative and unconventional actions, deemed too transgressive even in the comparatively liberal context of perestroika and the nascent national rebirth. The message sent by the free and radical expression of live art was eloquent enough for the authorities to understand that it was directed against the decaying dogmas of the system.

The activities of the NSRD did feature some land art elements, and a focus on the countryside as well, but in general their aesthetic can be said to be boldly urban and hip, even metropolitan, with discotheques, stage performances and self-publishing that were perhaps more similar to what was happening in West Berlin rather than in Vilnius at the time. If we focus on the first half of the 1980s, no strata of unofficial Lithuanian art displayed this kind of creative freedom and synchronicity with developments further West. While the NSRD probably could not have achieved a level of artistic

provocation like that of Laibach and NSK, the group's projects still look surprisingly emancipated for the time, even if they were not widely visible in the mainstream.

There was also practically no group in Lithuania that would have consistently functioned as both a musical act and an art performance collective. As Lediņš was involved with the discourse of architecture, the prime Lithuanian counterpart could have been the new wave and art rock band Antis, whose original line-up consisted mainly of architects. But Antis was not actively involved in the artistic scene in the way the NSRD was. A later theatrical art rock band IVTKYGYG was fronted by Artūras Barysas-Baras, who was a maverick counter-cultural figure comparable to Lediņš, and had been one of the mainstays of the Lithuanian underground experimental filmmaker community since the early 1970s. However, the frame of reference for Baras would be hippie subculture and not new wave and electronic media culture. In addition, the artistic spectrum of the activities of IVTKYGYG, too, was not as wide and conceptual as that of the NSRD. One possible exception could be Žuwys, a band and later interdisciplinary art collective founded in 1996 in the city of Šiauliai, but it was much more obscure and local compared to the Latvian group.

Exhibition view, 'NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation', Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

It should also be mentioned that the political attitude of the NSRD is vaguer and more playful than the openly dissident stance of most Lithuanian groups of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It seems to have thrived in the ambiguities and loopholes of the late Soviet period, blending with a range of imported, imagined and transformed influences and references from Western art and the Western intellectual discourse (speaking of which, the scale of the NSRD's awareness of concurrent developments and ideas beyond the Iron Curtain, as well as of theoretical prowess, is truly stunning and, I am afraid, unparalleled in Lithuania at the time). Hence the notion of 'approximate art' coined by Lediņš and Boiko: in a sense, it is a postmodern reading of the liminal state of the regime leading up to its ultimate agony. No wonder the NSRD effectively halted its activities after the Soviet era ended. But what the NSRD and the Lithuanian art groups had in common was an investment in creative collectivity as an antidote to the dehumanising collectivism imposed by the system.

What I found missing in the exhibition was a broader contextualisation of the NSRD with regard to the Lithuanian art scene. We only find out that the Latvians participated in a youth art festival in Kaunas, but it is unclear whether there were any further contacts with the Lithuanian artistic underground, or an awareness of its activities. However, this may not be the curators' fault, but rather a reflection of the fact that although the Baltic States are very much aligned in their political orientation and values, there is still much to be learned about their respective art histories, and even contemporary processes that are going on as we speak. 'Information about a Transformed Situation' is a bold step towards actually changing this situation. And since it features tributes to the NSRD by some cutting-edge contemporary Latvian artists, it also begs the question which Lithuanian cultural icons from the 1980s would also merit such an inheritance.

Exhibition view, 'NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation', Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

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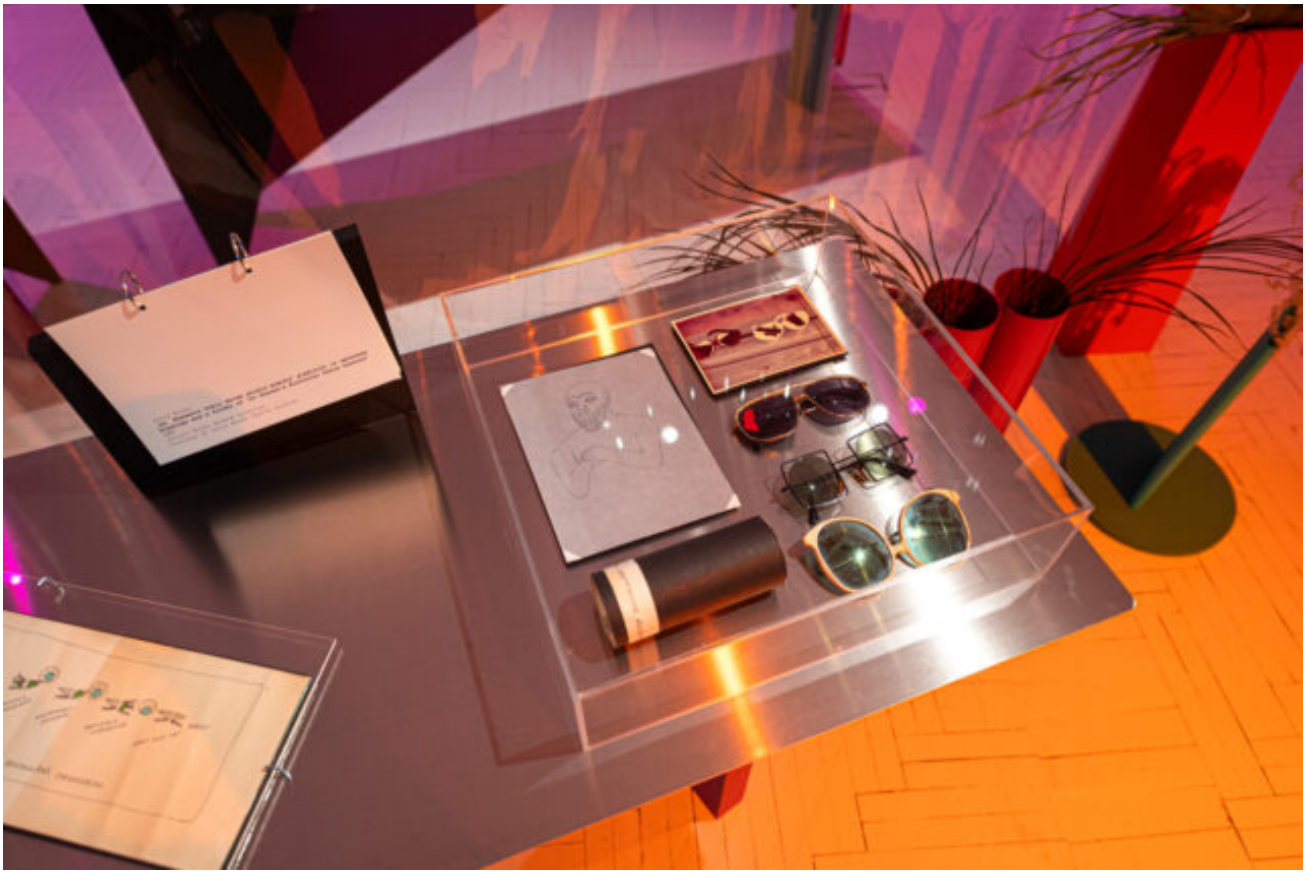

Exhibition view, ‘NSRD: Information About A Transformed Situation’, Radvila Palace Museum of Art, Vilnius, 2024-25. Photo: Gintarė Grigėnaitė

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We Were Here. The exhibition ‘It Used to Be a Castle’ by Marta Frėjutė and Sallamari Rantala at Editorial

February 26, 2025
Author Paulius Andriuškevičius

Sallamari Rantala, Fuzzy Chronology, 2024. Gathered and bought sand, PVA glue, plywood, 42 x 111 x 3 cm & Marta Frėjutė, Based on True Story, 2025. Stained glass, UV print, 39,5 x 30 x 3 cm

… indeed, it may be that the entrance to the castle is somewhere else entirely, somewhere in between, beyond the flickering veil of hands. After all, at the centre of the Editorial space stands a piece of furniture designed by the exhibition’s architect Vytautas Gečas, resembling a door without handles. Together with Marta Frėjutė’s yellow glass, marked with dark handprints, it forms the artwork ***We Were Here***. Perhaps the ‘we’ refers to those who have already passed through this portal into the castle, given the chance to experience its unexpected beauty. Our ancestors, in dark caves illuminated by firelight, once left imprints of their prehistoric bodies, traces that today smoulder with a distant glow amid strange fossils, relics and personal mementos. Like the other works in this two-artist exhibition, ***We Were Here*** speaks in its own way of archaeology and memory, retelling stories once heard long ago …

… meanwhile, Sallamari Rantala’s invisible artefacts lie dormant, preserved beneath a thick layer of sand. We see only their stencilled silhouettes, unable to grasp their true essence. Created from collected and purchased sand, the Finnish artist’s works resemble the scattered fragments of a dismantled work of origami: pieces that no longer fit together into a coherent whole, each existing in solitude. Although similar at first glance, their titles weave a narrative with distinct characters. My imagination is particularly stirred by the title ***Many Things Were Placed on That Shelf***, which brings me back to the presence of furniture, but also leads me to think of this small gallery as an exhibition shelf, one that has displayed so many artists, like seashells cast upon a lonely shore, each deemed worthy of admiration. These two artists are no exception, and as I explore the texture of the sand

from which these works are shaped, their intertwined melodies hum softly in my ears …

… now, Marta's remark resurfaces, that the materials found in the exhibition also appear in food. It's hard to forget that woman who once lived in Lithuania whose diet largely consisted of sand. And indeed, with their colour and texture, Sallamari's works strikingly resemble confections: biscuits, gingerbread, halva. Such a turn in the castle's corridors is not entirely unexpected, as Marta's secret multicoloured stained glass memory artworks (called ***sekretai*** in Lithuanian folk art) also take on the appearance of half-melted lollipops. And then, of course, there is that story about Marta's husband's family … How a wife would give her husband sink cleaner to drink, claiming it boosted his immunity. That's a true story. From it crystallised the artwork ***Based on a True Story***, a thick glass cast of a familiar household object, a bottle of sink cleaner. Faintly etched on to its surface is the giveaway phrase: 'sink cleaner and supplement'. It invites the thought, if our ancestors left behind awe-inspiring handprints on the walls of stone caves, we, in turn, are leaving our descendants rubbish with ambiguous labels …

… when thinking about storytelling, I feel compelled to return to Sallamari's works, as one of them, ***Fuzzy Chronology***, suspiciously resembles the long table at which the figures of Da Vinci's ***Last Supper*** were seated. It captivates with its perfect perspective and silent purity. Perhaps it could be seen as a sand-covered replica of one of Patricija Jurkšaitytė's paintings, where she depicts the interiors of great works, emptied of figures. I have no doubt that she copied Da Vinci as well. This series of sand-textured works indeed resembles blank canvases waiting for something, prepared to absorb like sponges. But what? Perhaps the visitors' experiences, or maybe that single lonely russet brushstroke on the surface of ***Becoming Sandcastle***. It stands out like a quiet betrayal, reminding us that within these seemingly assured monochromatic compositions lies a hidden spectrum of possibility …

… I cannot resist saying a few more words about Marta's stained glass artworks (***sekretai***), which, scattered throughout the gallery space, glow as they nestle closer to the windows. It is intriguing that, without realising it, the viewer perceives light filtered through a double layer of glass, both the window and the stained glass artwork. It recalls childhood moments when a protective pane of glass would be placed over a flower or a sweet wrapper, transforming it into a tiny picture, a secret fragment of reality, left behind for a passing stranger or future generations to discover. Marta's ***sekretai*** have more in common with Sallamari's sand 'cookies' than might first appear. After all, the truth is that, when heated to high temperatures with other impurities, sand transforms into glass. And ***sekretai*** are traditionally buried in sand or soil, making them almost inseparable from each other …

… how I wish I could gaze upon this castle with the eyes of a child, with vision untainted by context, to see pure forms, to understand how, whether by accident or design, one thing transforms into another. In the background, the muffled murmur of a duet of shells echoes, the waters of oblivion wash against the shore, and from the depths, images of memories emerge. There was something familiar here …

Marta Frėjutė, Based on True Story, 2025. Stained glass, UV print, 39,5 x 30 x 3 cm

Marta Frėjutė & Sallamari Rantala, It Used To Be a Castle, 2025. Exhibition view at Editorial, Vilnius

Marta Frėjutė, Sekretai, 2025. Stained glass, I 30 x 24 cm, II 33 x 28,5 cm, III 36 x 23 cm, IV 25,5 x 15,5 cm

Sallamari Rantala, Unanswering Drawer, 2024.
Gathered and bought sand, PVA glue, plywood, 92,5 x 34,5 x 3 cm

Marta Frėjutė & Sallamari Rantala, It Used To Be a Castle, 2025. Exhibition view at Editorial, Vilnius

Marta Frėjutė, Sekretai, 2025. Stained glass, I 30 x 24 cm, II 33 x 28,5 cm, III 36 x 23 cm, IV 25,5 x 15,5 cm