

Inside Smaug's Treasury

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Indrek Grigor

06/03/2018

On February 9 the Finnish Contemporary Art Museum Kiasma opened a special exhibition of works from their collection. The English version of the exhibition's title contains a blunt J.R.R. Tolkien reference: "There and Back Again – Contemporary Art from the Baltic Sea Region". I guess they had in mind the adventurous trip undertaken by a dwarf, a hobbit and a magician when choosing the title for the exhibition, but as it is a collection exhibition, meaning a showing-off of the museums treasury, I would prefer to see it as a reference to the dragon's treasure instead of a trip taken by little people.

Regional vs global

The Polish artist Dan Perjovschi has become famous for touring the world while drawing current political caricatures on gallery walls. His schematic decorating the lobby of the Tartu Art Museum for several years consisted of two spirals side by side. One spiral was spinning towards the middle, as indicated by an arrow, and was labeled "Local". The other spiral was indicated as spinning from the center towards the outside. This spiral was labeled "Global". I have always wondered whether Perjovschi meant this ironically, or had he fallen into a popular rhetorical trap? Globalization means centralization. Because it is trying to be all-encompassing, it directs its power towards the center. Local, on the other hand, is exclusive. It tries to establish itself as something unique and different. In this process, the outside world has the role of "the significant other", whereas the local is different and unique. The globalization process strives to pull everything towards its center as it tries to establishing itself as the standard; localization, on the other hand, directs all its power towards the border in order to establish itself.



Mikaelis Fišers. Officers Ball Together with Extraterrestrials at the Vaulted Hall of Neu-Schwabenlandin Honour of Osama bin Laden's elimination. 2011. Kokoelmat | Collections . KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Petri Virtanen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Petri Virtanen

In describing its collecting policy, Kiasma uses the metaphor of widening circles. This resurfaces in all of the articles included in the exhibition catalog. According to Maritta Mellais – who is responsible for the library and archive at the Finnish National Gallery – when the Finnish Contemporary Art Museum was established in 1991, “The expression ‘widening circles’ was used in respect to describing the weighting given to various regions. The epicenter was in Finland and Finnish art, and the next ring was formed by art from the Nordic, Baltic and south-western Russian regions.”



Flo Kasearu. Uprising (The Aircraft), 2015. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Pirje Mykkänen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen

In the course of the more than 25 years of Kiasma's history, the focus points have shifted and the circle has widened to encompass the whole Baltic sea region, and with the outer circle even beginning to reach Asia, South America and Africa in the 2000s. In the 1990s, the Baltic States were of high interest due to the rapid political changes going on in the region, but then the acquisitions slowed down in the 2000s, in parallel with "the robust development and internationalization of contemporary art in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania." Meaning the novelty effect was gone and the Baltics became boring. But apparently there has been a new wave of interest in the Baltics in the 2010s. Which at least partly is still tainted by an interest in works that relate, in one way or another, to our post-soviet history. In this latest exhibition at Kiasma, a prominent place has been given to Jaanus Samma's "A Chairman's tale" (2015); made for the Estonian pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennial, it looks at the faith of a homosexual man. Several times mentioned and featured in the catalog, but for purely practical reasons not exhibited, was Kristina Norman's "After War" (2009) from the Estonian pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennial. It is an installation dedicated to the so-called Bronze Night and its aftermath in Tallinn, when the Estonian government moved a statue – which had been erected during the soviet period as a memorial to soldiers who fell in the Second World War – from the city center to a military graveyard, thereby causing quite a bit of upheaval. Flo Kasearu's "Uprising" (2015), a video depicting two men folding the roof of a house into airplanes, reflects on the more contemporary issue of Russian airplanes intruding upon the airspace of the Baltic countries. But ultimately, it is still just a reflection of the world view of a Cold-War child. And in the end, also Miķelis Fišers' engagement with conspiracy theories is interpreted by the director of Kiasma, Leevi Haapala, as "paranoid thinking that arises from the mentality of the occupation period."

Fišers is participating in the exhibition with his painting “Extraterrestrials at the Vaulted Hall of Neu-Schwabenland in Honour of Osama bin Laden’s elimination” (2011) and a selection of his woodcarvings (2014 - 2016).

The aforementioned seems like a critical comment and, to some extent, it surely is. I must say I was kind of surprised that nobody came up with the idea to compare Karel Koplímets’ makeshift boat built from empty beer cans, “Case nr. 13. Waiting for the Ship of Empties” (2017), to a refugee boat. This is especially surprising as there is already a real story from the 19th century about people literally “waiting for the white ship”. A religious group of people were gathered on the coast near Tallinn, waiting for their prophet Malsvet to come on a white ship and take them to fruitful farming lands in Krimm. Much like Tallink now takes Estonians to the construction sites in Finland.

That said, in her article in the exhibition catalog, Estonian critic Rebeka Põldsam argues rather convincingly that the current investigations into the soviet period are not a repetition, but an essential rewriting of the past. She writes: “On a state level, there was a strong denial of the occupied era as part of history; it was treated as an embarrassing gap in time that was not to be discussed... people new that sooner or later certain stories have to be told. And therefore, at least in Estonia, the year 2007 brought a completely new wave of artists... Presenting positions that do not already have a specialized path before them, oftentimes in disciplines that are far from visual art, entails true struggle and risk; they have neither previous contextualization nor Google results... However, telling these decolonizing stories will lead to significant change and eventually provide a new subjectivity that has been dreamed about since the formative days of all the Baltic States in Eastern Europe.”

The last sentence is the ending sentence of Põldsam’s article and accordingly pathetic, but there is a point in what she is saying. I would argue that much of the controversy in Latvia surrounding the so-called Cheka bags [Soviet secret police documents on civilian informants], has to do with there being only one discourse to think about the archive – accusation and condemnation. I am not saying that there should be sympathy and forgiving instead. I am referring to the possibility that there is a third way of approaching the archive. Another kind of knowledge to be retrieved and centered upon. I believe that this is what Põldsam, too, is talking about.

One work for the ministry, one for the art fund, one for Moscow

All acquisitions made to the collections of the two art museums in Estonia are bought with support from the Cultural Foundation. The working principle of The Estonian Kulka is pretty much identical to that of the Latvian KKF, which I assume is common knowledge for the reader. At one point in 2016, the commission of Kulka suddenly decided not to support museum acquisitions anymore. The story behind the decision is a power struggle between the Ministry of Culture and Kulka over obligations. But why it is interesting in the current context is the signal it gives about the value given to museum acquisitions by artists who formed the dominant force of the Kulka commission.

Eha Komissarov, the grand old lady of the Estonian “curators guild”, told me in conjunction with an upcoming exhibition of works by Estonian artists at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow: “Didn’t you know that during the soviet times, one had to paint three works per

year? One was bought by the ministry, one was bought by the art fund, and one was bought by Moscow.” I must reveal my total and utter ignorance, but I really had not heard of these regular acquisitions of art from the republics going to the Tretyakov collection.

Anyway, if during the soviet period state acquisitions were an important part of the financial leverage that the state had in the art field, then today the museum is considered at best an archive, if not an outright storage facility. The bad conditions of museums is actually one of the few ways in which museums manage to break into the news these days. This was graphically reflected in an article written by the aforementioned Eha Komissarov, who works as a curator at Kumu. The article, which was a reaction to Kulka’s decision not to support museum acquisitions, ran short of legal arguments due to Komissarov not gaining access to documents from the first sessions of Kulka held in 1995, which is when Kulka’s principal obligations were agreed upon. So she reached instead for the argument that the days when curators would look for old works in attics and basements are over. Contemporary art is either archived in museums or recycled. So in order to have anything of current Estonian art to be preserved for the future, we must provide art museums with the means of acquiring it.

To make a dramatic gesture, Komissarov started her article with the suggestion that Kumu and Kiasma share their lists of planned acquisitions. They could keep tabs on what the other is doing, and perhaps Kiasma might be willing to agree on special future deals in which they would lend their works to the Estonians (read: at reduced cost). Komissarov’s comment is, first of all, just bile. The stinging bit being that we are even incapable of collecting our own art. Shame on us. But what is interesting in this formula is that art that has left our soil is not lost to us, as opposed to the people who have left Estonia to work abroad. The Estonian magazine “Vikerkaar” recently published an article by Klāvs Sedlenieks about the perception of emigration in Latvia. One strong point he made was about the position of “Us” as the ones who have stayed, as opposed to those who have left or are leaving. For example, the sentiment “Why should *we* pay for *their* education?”

Quite the opposite seems to be true about art. The Estonian Contemporary Art Development Center is an institution called to life to foster the export of Estonian art. This last autumn, it bought two works from the Tallinn Photomonth fair – one by Kristina Õllek and one by Diana Tamane – which will be donated(!) to prestigious foreign collections. (As far as I know, the specific collections have not been yet announced.) So, it seems that having works by our artists in foreign collections is more important to us than for the artist herself.

A few words about the exhibition

Looking at the way that the exhibition “There and Back Again” has been conceptualized at Kiasma, it looks like an attempt from the museum’s side to look at and understand what has been collected, how does it all “sound” together, and is their collecting policy still valid. The last question does not require any searchings since it has already been answered – the exhibition is now open, and even new works were acquired with the exhibition in mind, such as Daria Melnikova’s “Room 3. Follow me” (2015). If no one else is, at least Kiasma is definitely convinced of their answer.



Daria Melnikova. Room 3. Follow me, 2015. Installation, measures variable. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Pirje Mykkänen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen

According to Mellais, the initial “objective set for the collecting activities of Kiasma was to form a profiled collection that did not simply replicate the features of the world’s major contemporary art museums.” The curators of “There and Back again”, Saara Hacklin and Kati Kivinen, pull in some theoretical back-up, and while talking about a “significant collection of works, seen from the vantage point of a specific geographical location”, they don’t refer bluntly to regionalism or locality, but instead use Piotr Piotrowski’s famous concept of horizontal history, and speak about an alternative view that is opposing to the vertical world as seen “through the lens of specific capitals of the art world and their histories.” Despite Kiasma’s own obvious and understandable ambition in this process of alternative storytelling, I see no reason why we should not cherish being part of this world. Especially now that the future of the Latvian ABLV bank’s collection – the only other collection with a regional grasp and which was to form the basis for the Latvian contemporary art museum – is unclear, to say the least.



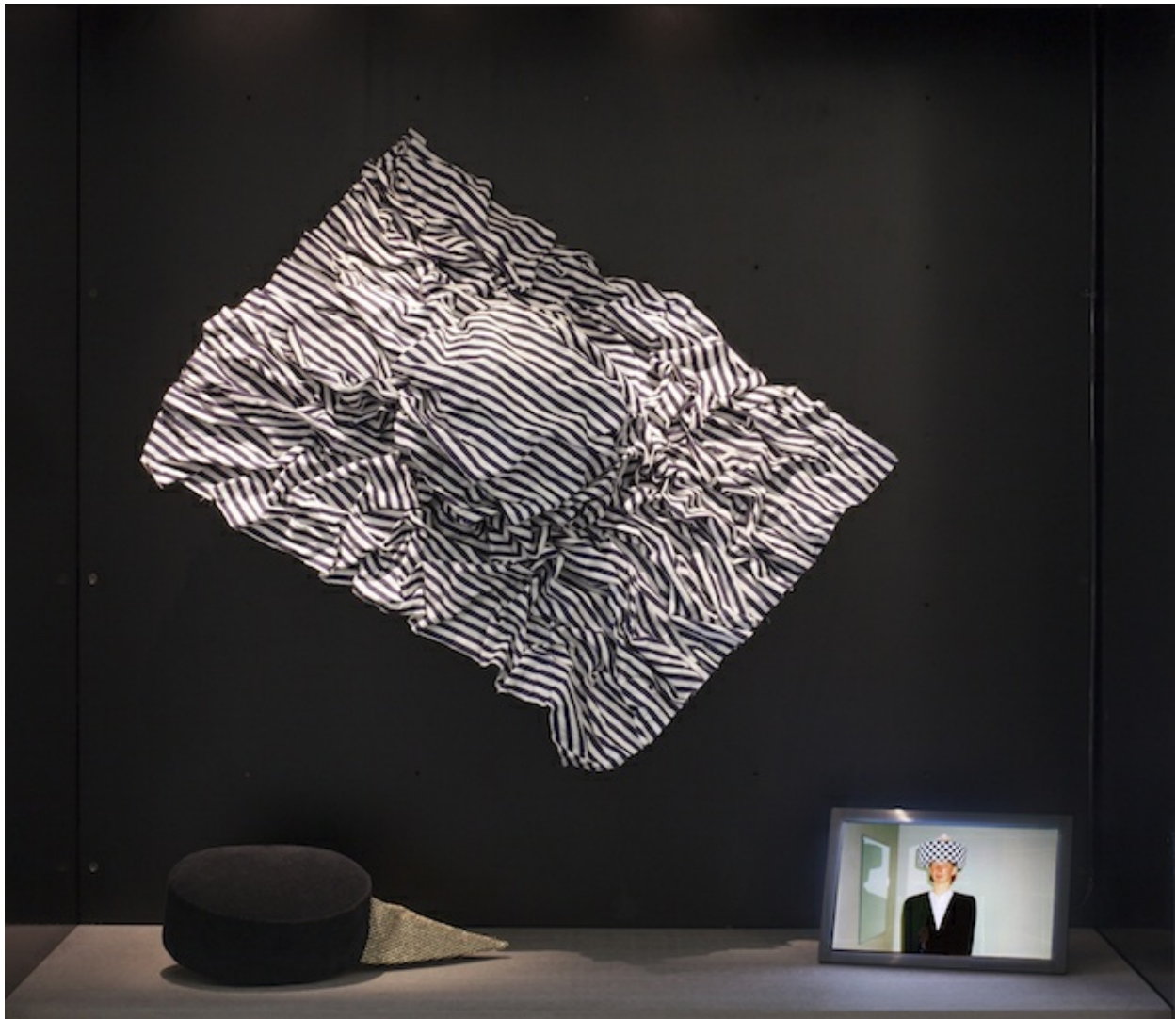
Alexei Gordin. *In Your Head*, 2016. From the series 'Do not disturb me from doing my art project'. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 98 cm. The Fund of Päivi and Paavo Lipponen, People's Culture Foundation. KUVA Kansallisgalleria, Petri Virtanen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery, Petri Virtanen

I have said rather little about the exhibition as such – the authors, the works and the curatorial choices. This has one, I would claim, good reason. The exhibition catalogue, as well as the materials in the exhibition, quite literally exhaust the works with their interpretations. To add another layer here, arguing, for example, about the symbolic meaning of dance in Jaan Toomik's video "Dancing Home" (1995), would seem off the point.

"There and Back Again" is an exhibition based on the Kiasma collection, but rather than telling the museological story of the collection, it emerges from a curatorial interest in how the works can be implemented into a story, i.e., what is the conceptual rather than the historical reason for the works being in the collection.



Alge Julija Kavaliauskaite. *Gnosis milk*, 2016. From the series Evening breakfast. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Petri Virtanen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Petri Virtanen.



Tea Tammelaan. Hats from the project Beyond Roles, 1996. Mixed media. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Pirje Mykkänen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen

That the story, or at least the exhibition as an aesthetic whole, is more important than the collection, is made obvious, for example, by the fact that not all of Inga Meldere's works on display actually belong to Kiasma. And a bit of a "museological layer" is added by, for example, the fact that works by Alexei Gordin, an Estonian painter who studied in Helsinki, ended up in Kiasma's collection before he had gotten any significant recognition in Estonia. But the "trick" is that his works are not part of Kiasma's own collection, but belong to the Päivi and Paavo Lipponen Collection, which is deposited at Kiasma and, as such, handled as part of Kiasma's collection. Acquisitions from graduate shows – next to Gordin there's the Lithuanian print-maker Alge Julija with works from her series "Evening Breakfast" (2016) – are exhibited side by side with finds from the historical layers of the collection, like the hats from Tea Tammelaan's project "Beyond Roles", and create contacts that would be unthinkable, for example, in Estonia. There are some works by Tammelaan in the design and architecture museum in Estonia, but all in all, she has not been active on the visual art scene since the late 90s. To be frank, I had never heard of her. That Kiasma would introduce me to Estonian art history was really not something that I had expected.



Inga Meldere. Bouquet, 2017-18. 120 x 75 cm. Acrylic and oil, UV print on canvas. Collections. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Pirje Mykkänen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen

As the curators are obviously professional, they leave little room to argue about their storytelling. What could be separately questioned or cherished are exhibition design choices. For example, it feels like the prints of Jüri Okas have been placed next to Flo Kasearu's video installation solely for formal reasons. One of Okas' prints, "Landscape XIa" (1990), has a triangle that resembles Kasearu's folded plain. Maria Tobola's "Amber Kebab" (2016) seems to, in a very similar manner, repeat the form of the vaulted caves under the polar ice as seen in Fišers' painting.



Maria Tobola. Amber Kebab, 2016. KUVA Kansallisgalleria/Pirje Mykkänen. Photo: Finnish National Gallery/Pirje Mykkänen

There is quite often talk about how important it is to have big regional art centers in the region as they bring us contemporary stars that our local institutions could not afford to invite. But let's be honest. In this day and age of cheap flights, it's actually more convenient and cheaper to go to Berlin or London than to Helsinki. But in order for us to see our artists in any other setting than their hometown, one has to take an overseas trip.