

# Baltics Gone Wrong

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“Down The Baltic Way to Freedom” says the banner text; Mini Europe park in Brussels. Photograph by Gyvenimo Stebėtojas

The curators of IV Artishok Biennale (henceforth AB) – a result of cooperation of artists and critics from Estonia and Latvia – comment on the *status quo* of art relations between Estonia and Latvia that are symptomatic to all three Baltic states.

It seems that Estonian cultural ties to Latvia are marked by a syndrome of rediscovery. Surprisingly, the only subject of a more thorough written analysis is the relationship between the Group of Estonian Artists and Latvian constructivists.

There is a sense of mutual interest when exploring the era of the Khrushchev Thaw of the 1960s though due to the language barrier mostly, there has been little progress so far.

For instance, the fact that Latvian and Estonian art circles were so tightly knit during the heyday of the Soros art center in the 1990s came as a surprise to us, unveiled in personal interactions. Solvita Krese, the director of the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, recalled an amusing episode at the opening of Margit Lõhmus's exhibition at the Office Gallery in April involving Anders Härm and Hanno Soans as co-curators. At IV Artishok Biennale Reet Varblane and Liina Siib who were in Riga as visitors spoke of how the Latvians took the bus to Tallinn to visit art exhibitions. Furthermore, to glimpse back into the Estonian cultural past, for example considering the importance of Riga in Estonian folk song, it could be surmised there have been numerous occasions of intense communication followed by a period of oblivion.

Whatever the reasons behind the tendentiousness of relations, we see ample cause for talk of reconnecting, even though the historical experience might suggest it could inevitably remain a mere episode.

The topicality of the Latvian connection or – one might like to think – its importance is already highlighted by the experience of the Soros art centers. The Soros centers for contemporary art forcefully championed a relatively homogenous type of art and supported its international circulation thus ensuring the project's sustainability.

A similar state on the current art scene has been created by the so-called Nordic money. Looking at the international exhibitions of recent years there is nearly always a Scandinavian to be found. That in itself is nothing deplorable but knowing that it's caused by the fact that including a Scandinavian artist gives cause to speak of cooperation and apply for project support from wealthy Nordic funds raises the question, what is the effect of this tendency on our art sphere?

IV AB carried a conscious purpose to enhance communication between the Latvian and Estonian art scenes and we showed it as such at the possible exhibition locations of the project. So it came as somewhat of a shock when the project was met with rejection and the question, why are there no interesting (sic!) Scandinavian artists included?

The question still haunts us, did the person asking it have to display cooperation with Nordic countries in more extensive projects and the reports of the exhibition space or was it prompted by a sincere belief that a Scandinavian artist could improve the exhibition?

Be it as it may, the ideology led to the AB taking place in a private gallery, the Mūkusalas art salon belonging to businessman and casino owner Jānis Zuzāns. The status of private art gallery should not be misunderstood, it is not a so-called sales gallery. The Mūkusalas gallery is a prominent exhibition space near the new national library and the owner Jānis Zuzāns is the biggest buyer and collector of contemporary Latvian art. On the other hand, the danger of oligarchy should not be underestimated. You could sense a peculiar shift in the behaviour of the staff when the gallery owner himself decided to be present. It is also a danger to the sustainability when the whole art sphere is dependant of a single person, figuratively speaking, as is the case with Latvia. What if he unexpectedly dies in a car crash? Nonetheless the gallery's different ideology was something of a refreshing change compared to the nationally financed institutions following the written (and unwritten) statutes of the funds. It is not a matter of right or wrong ideology but of diaspora and if and what it enables. Norms in the form of artistic language are crucial to insuring the communicative ability of art. It is necessary to learn to work within those bounds and true mastery is expressed in the ability to redefine them. But if norms are the same everywhere the overall look of art becomes inevitably dull.



Mūkusala art salon in Riga, venue of the Artishok Biennale in 2014

In the previous ABs there have always been two guest critics in addition to the eight local critics to offer an outsider's view. This is a relatively complicated situation for the guests because, in a way, they are competing at a disadvantage. IV AB, held in Latvia, though its unique format was imported from Estonia, involved five Estonian and five Latvian artists along with five Estonian and five Latvian critics thus giving everyone equally a familiar and an alien position. As somewhat of a surprise, the situation posed no problems to the participants. At least none were visible in the critics' texts. For example Elena Šmakova's "psychoanalytical" short stories that seem to require personal contact are just as adequate when treating both the Estonian and Latvian artists. And this irrespective of the fact that she probably had no prior knowledge of the participating Latvian artists. Latvian artist and critic Anna Salmane who resides and works in London outsourced the articles to her acquaintances in the UK. Salmane's reasoning behind the move was to get an idea of how her Western European colleagues understand the cultural context. Also it is noteworthy she did not question her own ability to understand the Estonian cultural context.

Tanel Rander, a critic at this year's AB, made political statements about the concept of nation-state as a condemnable Western European notion and of a sense of communion of Eastern Europe based on historical experience that we, the curators obviously took a liking to. Stemming from this ideology we attempted to resolve the state of IV AB where geographically close small countries know next to nothing about each other's field of art.

We have already partially answered the question of whether the AB fulfilled its purpose; at least within the span of the event it became clear that essentially there are no barriers. Our historical and contemporary art cultures are basically identical due to similar experiences and external influences. A spectator uninformed in art of both of the countries would probably not be able to discern who is from where. Perhaps it is time to abandon the attitude that we know nothing about one another, be it based on comfortable false modesty or on the ideological idea criticized by Rander of Estonia as a Scandinavian country whose shared part in Eastern Europe is merely the historical trauma that is to be forgotten.

Latvian and Estonian art fields are similar enough to hold significantly closer relations with each other, even if it is purely pragmatic. Essentially there is no reason why Estonian artists couldn't hold exhibitions outside the galleries of

Tallinn and Tartu, for example in Riga or Liepāja. Projects like “Kohatu” (meaning placeless/out of place) organized by Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia with the purpose to take art to the country side point to the notion that the gallery scene of the centers is no longer satisfactory. By the way the same tendencies can be noticed in the Latvian art sphere.

Daugavpils just opened a Mark Rothko center and the city of Kuldīga has unexpectedly started drawing attention. Although in addition to discovering the periphery, which is in itself absolutely praiseworthy, it would be useful to reconsider the centers too.