



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: Dnr 46/15

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Project title: Art, culture, conflict: transformations of museums and memory culture in the Baltic Sea region after 1989

1. Purpose of the project

The aim of this project is to map, analyze and interpret changing conditions for exhibitions of art and culture on institutions of art and culture (museums of art and culture/history, memory sites and contemporary art venues) around the Baltic sea region after 1989 until the present. Questions raised concern, for example, how narratives of the nation, culture and history were negotiated during this period, and especially in the direct aftermath of the cold war, the resolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Baltic states. How were these stories transformed, ideologically and communicatively, i.e. politically as well as practically, pedagogically or discursively?

Based on the critical discussion around identities – national, international, transnational, Nordic, Baltic, European and global – the project investigates the role assigned to art and culture in different kinds of institutions. Through quantitative as well as qualitative analyses of exhibitions, museums and memory places in the selected countries, the project has tried to gain a wider knowledge on these cases and phenomena, with particular respect to the shifts of identity during the period – their character, extent and multiplication as well as ideological coding. The empirical material derives from institutions in nations formerly a part of the Soviet Union (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), as well as Eastern Europe (Poland) and their Nordic neighbors (Finland and Sweden). (Quickly, however, we realized that the ambition of the project to cover Poland was over-ambitious and not realistic within the scope and timeframe of the project. To make amends for this omission, one of us chose to center his research around the theoretical, political and art-historical work on art historiography and museography of one of the most well-renowned scholars on post-communist art and identity: Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski.)

Overall, the repercussions of the dismantling of the Berlin wall in November 1989 were not only to be seen on the European continent, but in Northern Europe as well. Sweden and Finland became EU-members in 1995 and the Baltic countries and Poland followed in 2004. The world-wide financial crisis of 2008 impacted the countries of former Eastern Europe particularly hard and many developing initiatives and projects were stalled, which we found ample evidence of during these years. That narratives shifted due to these events is well known, but how and to what effects has been less researched. These transformations are also highly unequally realized, and some are still taking place. Part of the challenges of researching contemporary history is of course that things are not yet settled and developments still in the making. The upshot is the chance to get a hold of agents of this change, and, through direct encounters and interviews, create sources for analysis and future records. What this project contributes is a wider picture, where different strategies and performed identities of each case can be related to each other, not least to two countries on the border of Eastern Europe: Sweden and Finland (often enough



marginalized, as such, in summary accounts on (Western) Europe or in allegations on eurocentrism). Almost all previous scholarship and knowledge of these post-1989 events are embedded in national narratives or even in the context of singular institutions. Our aim is to gain a transnational perspective on this region, in view of a changing map of Europe, as part of a globalized world.

The main research questions are: what changes of the exhibitions and institutions occurred and how can these be understood from an ideological as well as practical point of view? How did the institutions respond to the desire for change, and how may these responses be related to or compared with each other? What role was ascribed to art and culture in effectuating these changes, as a facilitator of national development, for example, or as critical resistance to attempts at re-nationalizing or consolidating certain interests? Building on the results of the recently concluded project European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen (EuNaMus) (2010-13), we opted, however, for a partly different model. Apart from key questions concerning institutional types, management and ownership, we also studied specific exhibitions and details on them (scope, curator, response, etc.), regarding permanent and temporary shows as well as exported or travelling ones.

Although all transformations relevant to this project can be understood as politically motivated, with various ideological implications, we are interested in detecting less explicit signals and agendas. We study external as well as internal museum narratives (Bodenstein & Poulot), i.e. outreaching stories via exhibitions as well as the institution's meta-narrative on these exhibitions, connected, e.g., to previous exhibitions, older display formats, cultural traditions or national narratives. Essential to all our case studies is to compare what is openly communicated and what could be picked up 'between the lines', as it were. Focusing on the manifest content and explicit concept of the cases, on what visitors were able to encounter, we thereby refrain, in general, from studying planning, preparatory documents and various deliberations among the actors involved leading up to the exhibition itself. Nor is reception history of relevance to this project, except, again, in so far as the exhibitions are commented on by the institutions themselves as part of their own heritage and identity-forming history making. To study exhibitions from the recent past involves searching the catalogues, press releases and other relevant documents, including photo documentation of installations, website presentations etc., around these events. Not to mention oral information from informants that we are able to contact today.

Theoretically, this project as a whole, containing three semi-independent case studies, takes the exhibition as a medium as its central object of concern, in a range of different situations: art museums, *Kunsthalle*, centers for contemporary art as well as historical and cultural museums and sites. We follow a wide definition of "exhibition" as "publicly sanctioned representations of identity [and] narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience" (Ferguson, 175), to which we also add presentations as part of the public space, where they function as "lieux de memoire" (Nora). Also, the interest within global contemporary art around archives, cultural memory, time and history after 1989 is particularly relevant to consider dealing with this material (Osthoff; Adler & McCorquodale).

Museums present artwork and cultural artefacts within the framework of installation, a composition of elements serving didactic, pedagogical and aesthetic, sometimes also artistic, purposes. All of these rely, in turn, on scientific, cultural and political decisions connected to the sender. Following Ferguson, we view exhibitions as materialized discursive utterances, which function communicatively as well as performatively. What



they ‘say’ is thus not only to be found in press material, catalogue essays and wall texts, but in the totality of its textual and aesthetic (visual/sensual) expression as well. In a further step, this totality speaks too of political decisions and choices, even when these messages may come across as mute or merely implicit.

Artworks are prominently displayed also in non-art venues, such as historical museums, including artefacts considered as art, e.g. craft objects, furniture, costumes, memorabilia, posters, etc. But also in the form of artistic interventions, additions and comments, as a curatorial concept of today. One and the same artistic object will be semiotically and ontologically transformed if framed as art, connected to art history and the “art world” (Danto), or displayed as material culture, a historical object of memory or national identity. Of interest is thus the mediated message or “story” (Bal), including unintended “noise”, all of which must be disconnected from the physical object, as such, as well as various communicated intentions from the sender.

A theoretical point of departure for this project was the research carried out by Piotr Piotrowski, on the postwar art scene of Eastern Europe (2009), post-communist art and “horizontal art history” (2012), as opposed to what he terms vertical art history, by which he means hierarchical Western models. Focusing places and localities instead of larger regions and nations is one dimension of this work, where new patterns of interconnections and transnational relations are made evident. Publications like *Art of the Baltics* (2002) and *Promises of the Past* (2010) are also invaluable sources for our project. Further theoretical input derives from the Slovenian artist collective IRWIN: *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (2006), aiming to acknowledge the largely hitherto neglected Eastern part of Europe, which in international research and education is almost completely identified with the West, although not even referred to as Western Europe, but as Europe tout court. They contended also how little has been accomplished when it comes to “serious comparisons between the Eastern and the Western European context for art production” (14). Another important source, not least in terms of method, is the research project ARTL@S at École normale supérieure in Paris, which has tried to achieve precisely the above-cited objective. Using their historic database BasArt, which collects, archives and makes available data on numerous different levels, we are able to add this quantitative, geo-referential instrument to process our material. Their explicit ambition conforms to “horizontalizing” art history by giving due to a variety of margins and peripheries of the global art map and its established canons.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

1. Dan Karlholm’s contribution to this project boils down to two articles, dealing with various aspects of our project themes as they resonate with the work of P. Piotrowski. The first article is an assessment of the concept and research program of “horizontal art history”. Merits and problems of this program are discussed, and a re-formulation attempted towards a more horizontal or lateral alternative without the avant-gardism of HAH, which ultimately seems unable to depart from Western-generated hierarchical art history and its structures of domination between centres and margins. The other article concerns two studies by Piotrowski on Eastern European museum history in the post-communist period. One is devoted mainly to issues of trauma management, contemporaneity and cultural identity, and the other presenting a methodological tactic to deflect the power of the art-historical museum piece in critical and democratic ways. Reflecting on how they deal with psychological as well as openly political issues, an



interpretation is presented to assess their joint contribution to the study of East European art and museum culture and the broader interdisciplinary field of critical museography.

2. Johan Hegardt concludes in his case study “History between Red Brackets” (see below) that Sweden and partly also Finland have in their national museums neglected or explicitly chosen not to display the Cold War period for practical but also political reasons. On the other hand, army and war museums have displayed the period but only as a national military success in neutrality. The three Baltic States have, contrary to Finland and Sweden, worked explicitly with the Cold War period, or as it is called in the Baltic States: the years of occupation. Yet, even if these years of occupation are and have been on display in the national museums and in other museums in the Baltic region, the period has always been placed between brackets, red brackets as they are called here. The reason is that the years of Soviet occupation is and should not be placed as one historical block in building the nation.

3. Annika Öhrner’s contribution to this project is a study of hitherto unexplored relations within and between the Nordic art scene and the ones of the three Baltic countries, during the transit period. In the delimited post-1989-momentum, a decade then perceived as a “buffer to the past and an antechamber for the future” (Jablonskiene 2010), an extremely intense exhibition activity emerged within the Baltic countries, a symptom of the desire to explore new artistic post-Soviet identities and be exposed to an “international” art scene. Following P. Piotrowski’s imperative to turn the interest not just towards “the colonizer”, but towards in what way the artists in and curators from the Baltic countries wanted these new exhibitions to be inspected, the study reveals a conception of a certain Baltic-Nordic realm that cannot be explained within the more general critique of cultural transfer of Western ideas of “contemporary” and postmodern art to the East. Thus, the study deepens the knowledge of how historical-political relations within the region affected this scene, and of how it functioned as a “testbed” for young artists and curators coming from two contexts, while exploring regional aspects of cultural transfer (P. Bourdieu 2020, M. Espagnes 2006).

3. The project’s contribution to the international research frontline

Our results, communicated through conferences and publications, all in English, are part of the international research frontline, if by the latter is not just understood a plane of excellence, but a territory where new perspectives are brought forth based on new thinking and new empirical studies. Important to note is that nothing similar has been done before. The project’s inter-sectorial and multi-disciplinary team of researchers as well as its theoretical dimensions and complex empirical material has made it a frontline research project. This is also clear from the interest shown from our colleagues in Finland and in the Baltic States and the will to publish our texts in international journals and publications.

As concerns the transition period of the exhibition culture in the area, an important emerging research field is the analysis of the activities of the Soros Art Foundation whose initiatives were crucial for the emerging art scenes of the former East in general. This is acknowledged but also criticized in ongoing research that discusses their harsh introduction of “Western” institutional structures. While introducing the Nordic position in this complex transcultural play and the importance of regional relations in the Northern sphere of the



East-West divide, the project has been able to reverse the centre-periphery model of the research field which tends to have a Central European emphasis.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

We have collectively gained a wider and deeper base for comparative, quantitative projects along similar lines. The same kind of research questions would still be most relevant to actualize in a follow-up project devoted to the situation in Poland, a country which during the years we have spent on this project has changed in alarmingly anti-democratic ways. Another research question would be to study how the inclusion of the Nordic and Baltic countries into the European Union changed the rules of the game for the contemporary art scene and the interaction in the Nordic-Baltic region.

For Hegardt, the project has resulted in several new research ideas, one of which has been granted project funding, and one has been sent to the Swedish Research Council (VR). The first project, financed by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, is called “Traces of oblivion: heritage, identity and memory in the wake of a nationalistic turn”. The second project is called “The polemic politics of heritage: material culture in conflict and unity”. Karlholm is also leading a VR-funded project on “political aesthetics”, especially concerning fascism in Europe, which is partly related to core issues of our joint research project.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Apart from what we write under 3 above, this project has contributed new knowledge to the research on this region, emphasizing the events following ‘1989’ in the world of exhibitions of art and history in museums and other venues. We have been able to show new interconnections between the studied countries, in relation to Sweden and Finland, which are usually not seen as contextually relevant to such studies. Also, as we research, for example, how the theoretical notion of horizontal art history connects with a global field, or how exhibitions of contemporary art are exported and disseminated to a much wider cultural territory, new insights are gained on the issue of what Eastern Europe means in practice. It is not just a neutral territory, or a neglected area aiming for recognition; it is an idea and an ideological, political construct that forces us to see other blind spots in our own territory, the so-called West. What is evident for a scholar like Piotrowski, studied in particular by Karlholm here, is that although his entire body of work deals with the nations constituting Eastern/Central Europe, he always compares these to the ‘outside’ world, and ultimately to a global or “alter-global” frame of reference. Contributing to the research knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe inevitably contributes to the knowledge of other regions of the world. Not to marginalize and essentialize this region (again), a strategic cosmopolitan, post- and decolonial perspective is required. The world is one, and increasingly so, for better or worse, since 1989.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community



Publications

Johan Hegardt, "History between Red Brackets: The Cold War in History Museums around the Baltic Sea", *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 7 2019 (peer review)

Johan Hegardt, "Better Red than Dead – Remembering Cold War Sweden", in *Words, Bodies, Memory: A Festschrift in honor of Irina Sandomirskaja*, ed. Lars Kleberg; Tora Lane; Marcia Sá Cavalcante Shuback, Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2019: <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1346313/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Dan Karlholm, "From Horizontal Art History to Lateral Art Studies", accepted for publication in *Horizontal Art History and Beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. Agata Jakubowska & Magdalena Radomska, London & New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2021 (peer review)

Dan Karlholm, "Traumatic Contemporaneity: Reflections on Piotr Piotrowski's Critical Museography", forthcoming in *Baltic Worlds* 2021 (peer review)

Annika Öhrner, "Art History Outside The National Paradigm: Soros Art Centers In A Global Perspective": Review of *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*. Eds. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, *Baltic Worlds*, Vol 2. 2019: <http://balticworlds.com/art-history-outside-the-nationalist-paradigm/>

Annika Öhrner, *A Baltic-Nordic realm in Art. On transnational relations as constructed in new art exhibitions within the Post-Soviet Baltic Sea area*. Monograph intended for publication in the series *Södertörn Studies in Art History and Aesthetics*, forthcoming in 2021 (peer review)

Conferences

"How to Remember, How to Forget? Post-Soviet Museum Practices around the Baltic Sea", international conference at CBEES/Södertörn University, arranged by Dan Karlholm, Johan Hegardt and Annika Öhrner, in collaboration with Färgfabriken art space. Nov 15, 2018. Keynote speakers: Rimvydas Laužikas, Professor of digital Social Science and Humanities, The Faculty of Communication, Vilnius University, Susanna Pettersson, Ph.D, Director General of Nationalmuseum, Stockholm and Linara Dovydaityte, Associate professor, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas. Followed by a workshop for invited conference participants on Nov 16 at Färgfabriken.

Johan Hegardt, "The red parentheses: Museums, memory and the making of [new]nations after the fall of the Iron Curtain", What does heritage change? Association of Critical Heritage Studies, Third biennial conference, Montreal, Canada, June 2016.



Johan Hegardt, "The red parentheses: Museums and memory around the Baltic Sea", The Practical Past: on the advantages and disadvantages of history for life. International Network for Theory of History, Ouro Preto, Brazil, August 2016.

Dan Karlholm, "The nation as a meaning-making unit in Art history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries", workshop, arranged by Anna Lena Karlsson, Stockholm University, April 2018.

Annika Öhrner, session chair for "Transitioning Spaces" at the conference Lost and Found Spaces: Displacements in Eastern European Art and Society in the 1990s, KUMU Museum of Art, Tallinn, Nov 1-3, 2018.

Annika Öhrner, "A 'buffer to the past and antechamber for the future'? Transnational spaces in the Post-Soviet Baltic Sea Area art exhibitions", Research Network "The Center-Periphery Divide? Scandinavian Network Exhibition Studies", Symposium Rosersberg castle, 29-30 August 2019.