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Entanglements and Cross-Border Connectivity of the Nordic–Baltic Region

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Nordic–Baltic Cross-Border Connectivity

Guest editors

**Marta Edling and
Annika Öhrner**

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Entanglements and Cross-Border Connectivity of the Nordic–Baltic Region

This issue presents research on translocal, transnational, regional, and worldwide contacts inside and outside the Nordic-Baltic region. The contributions, written by scholars from Danish, Swedish, and Finnish universities, present examples of cultural exchange of the five Nordic nation-states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Together they give in-depth accounts of cases of art and design transfers, artistic travels, Scandinavian intellectual contacts and cross-border connections over 100 years, from the late 1800s to the late 1900s.¹

At the center of attention is the communicative and interactive function of cross-border contacts. Many of the articles examine long-distance collaborations that nurtured artistic, political or commercial interests aiming, for example, to attract

attention to a style (surrealism), organize a political manifestation (against apartheid), promote (American or Danish) consumer goods, or develop new infrastructure for contemporary art. This interdependent nature of international relations is also visible in the texts dealing with intermediate positions, such as the role of the city of Copenhagen (for artists' networks and travels) or the mediating function of individuals (such as Georg Brandes). What many texts further demonstrate is that Paris, a presumed center of canon art history up until the mid-twentieth century, rather played the role of a node. It functioned as a space for creating all kinds of links and contacts, facilitating, for example, networking among Scandinavian artists as well as allowing artists working in the French capital to interact with foreign contacts in order to get ahead of the local competition.²

By the late nineteenth century, the increase in the Nordic artists' and writers' international travels and cultural interaction occurred in parallel with nationalist debates on and ideas of cultural autonomy.³ Advocating international contacts, the Danish intellectual Georg Brandes was convinced of the advantages of cultural mediation. He saw a national revival as a threat to Danish literature, which would lead to isolation. This active interest in establishing

Our collaboration with the Artl@s project started ten years ago in December 2012, when Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel invited Annika Öhrner to present her research on the early Nordic avant-garde at the Artl@s-seminar. In 2013, the symposium "Global Art History and the Peripheries" was arranged by the Artl@s project at École Normale Supérieure Paris. The following year, Södertörn University hosted the symposium "Art in Transfer: Curatorial Practices and Transnational Strategies in the Era of Pop," focusing on transnational aspects of the arts. In April 2015, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel gave a lecture entitled "What Quantitative and Transnational Approaches Do to the History of Modernism" at the research seminar in art history at Södertörn University. The symposium "Cross-Border Connectivity in Nordic–Baltic Art in the Late 19th and 20th Centuries," arranged in collaboration with the Artl@s project and ReNEW, took place on May 17–18, 2021, at the Swedish Institute in Paris and online. Here eight scholars from Nordic and Baltic universities and museums presented their research. During the academic year 2021-2022, several Nordic scholars presented their research at the Artl@s Seminar, 2020–2021: "Artistic Circulations in/towards/from Northern Europe." We would like to thank Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Catherine Dossier for this decade of stimulating dialog, warm friendship, intellectual encounters, and creative platform building.

¹ On the use of the terms "transnational" and "cross-border" and the dilemma of studying social phenomena in relation to a territorial framework, see Anna Amelina, Thomas Faist, Nina Glick Schiller, and Devrim Sel D. Nergiz, "Methodological Predicaments of Cross-Border Studies," in *Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Research Methodologies for Cross-Border Studies*, ed. Anna Amelina (New York: Routledge, 2012).

² For an example of the use of cross-border contacts in order to deal with competition in Paris, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1918-1945: une histoire transnationale* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2017), 486–514.

³ On ideas of national revival, see, for example, Anna Maria von Bonsdorff and Riitta Ojanperä, eds., *European Revivals: From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange* (Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 2020). On the international contacts of Nordic artists and authors, see Hubert van den Berg, ed., *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1900–1925* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012).

international contacts can also be seen in the itineraries of Scandinavian artists in the late nineteenth century.⁴ Their travels were facilitated by technical innovations multiplying the long-distance transfer of both humans and information across Europe (for example, the expansion of the railways between 1830 and 1880, the invention of the telephone in 1876 or the undersea telegraph cable in 1865). This increased territorial range of action is also reflected in artists' networks and collaborations in the first three decades of the twentieth century, as, for example, in the case of the Swedish artists travelling to Italy in the interwar years. Taken together, these international contacts demonstrate the importance of the early period of "Europeanization" (1880–1913), which, according to the French historian Christophe Charle, also represents the first phase of the globalization of modernity through increased transatlantic interaction.⁵

In the later postwar period, international contacts expanded also as a result of the increase in the number of Nordic public art institutions displaying and circulating international art. Steps were taken to create cultural exchanges with both Eastern and Western Europe as well as the US and the Soviet Union. It was the policy of the Nordic countries to find a balancing position in the Cold War political tension promoting the idea of a "middle way" between communism and capitalism.⁶ National institutes and cultural export committees were established, such as the Danish Working Committee Regarding Cultural Exchanges with the Soviet Bloc in 1963 and the Swedish National Committee for Contemporary Art Exhibitions Abroad in 1965. It is important to note, as demonstrated in several articles, that this cross-border exchange was often regional. Contacts spanned the Iron Curtain, as, for example, in small-scale personal networks and collaborations between Lunds konsthall (a municipal art gallery) in Sweden and Polish artists, or in large state-funded exhibitions in Eastern Europe.

⁴ See, for example, Alexandra Herlitz, *Greiz-sur-Loing Revisited: The International Artists' Colony in a Different Light* (PhD diss., Gothenburg University, 2013).

⁵ Christophe Charle, *Discordance des temps. Une brève histoire de la modernité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011) 251–79.

⁶ Mary Hilson *The Nordic Model. Scandinavia since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books 2008) 116–117.

The collapse of the Cold War political divide after 1989 even intensified this focus on regional collaboration. Now art became instrumental in political strategies to expand the region through economic and military alliances with close-by partners in the Baltic States.

The method used in each text varies. Some authors adopt an ideographic approach to examine an individual, a group of artists, or a single exhibition; others present results from quantified studies of artists' travels or temporary/traveling exhibitions. Most texts, however, concentrate on exhibitions that have received little or no attention in earlier research. They present new knowledge on a number of publicly funded temporary/traveling exhibitions showcased in museums and public art galleries, often attracting tens of thousands of visitors.

These exhibitions represent the very opposite of a Kantian "disinterestedness," demonstrating instead the interrelatedness of culture, commerce, and world politics. The articles report on art transfers and exhibitions furthering cultural diplomacy, being saturated with "interests," and having very different agendas. An exhibition could, explicitly or implicitly, promote capitalist market values and a US lifestyle or Nordic social-democratic welfare ideals, just as it could mediate Communistic propaganda, aim to create an ideological debate, or pave the way for neoliberal market development. The articles also reveal how these exhibitions started from ideas about the strong and positive effect of art. It appears simply to have been taken for granted by, for example, Nordic foreign policy officials, the US Information Agency, and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida that art impacts humans aesthetically, politically, and ethically. The audiences were also explicitly addressed as consumers at exhibitions where the art was for sale or where design and modern merchandise were displayed. Art was thus used as a tool for cultivating taste, moral values, political ideals, and consumption.

The organizational complexity of temporary/traveling exhibitions is also highlighted in this issue. Exhibitions often involved individuals and their personal interests just as much as state policy

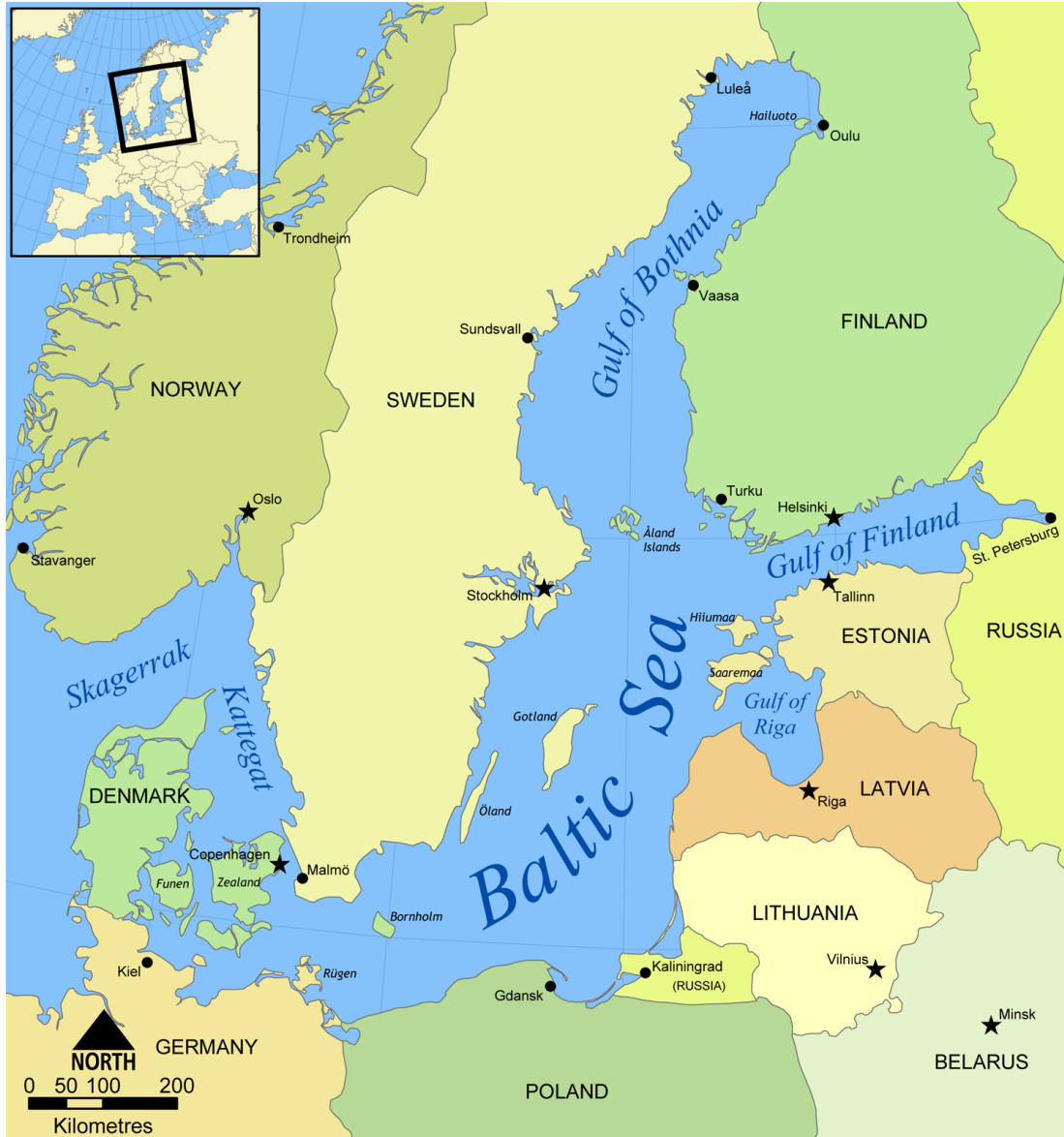


Figure 1. Map of the Baltic Sea. Designer: Norman Einstein (2006). Data Source: Wikicommons. No base map.

and trade relations. They promoted market values as well as ideological and political protest. What also becomes clear is that the exhibitions were joint ventures in several senses: they were publicly funded, most often displaying artists' groups; they were dependent on collaborations between public art museums and funding institutions. In addition, they required a range of expertise, not just artistic and curatorial but also administrative skills for handling customs and shipping, manual labor for getting the installation and lighting ready, as well as a familiarity with handling censorship and/or market promotions.

In conclusion, one might say that, taken together, the relations and routes investigated in the texts demonstrate how Nordic–Baltic contacts have worked across a geographic scale, creating cross-border linkages at micro, meso, or macro levels and promoting exchange with the East, West, and South. The results thus confirm observations found in earlier research on the importance of transnational, regional, or even local networks and structures for worldwide transfers.⁷ The importance of regional

⁷ See, for example, Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2004), 156–57; S. P. Fraiberger

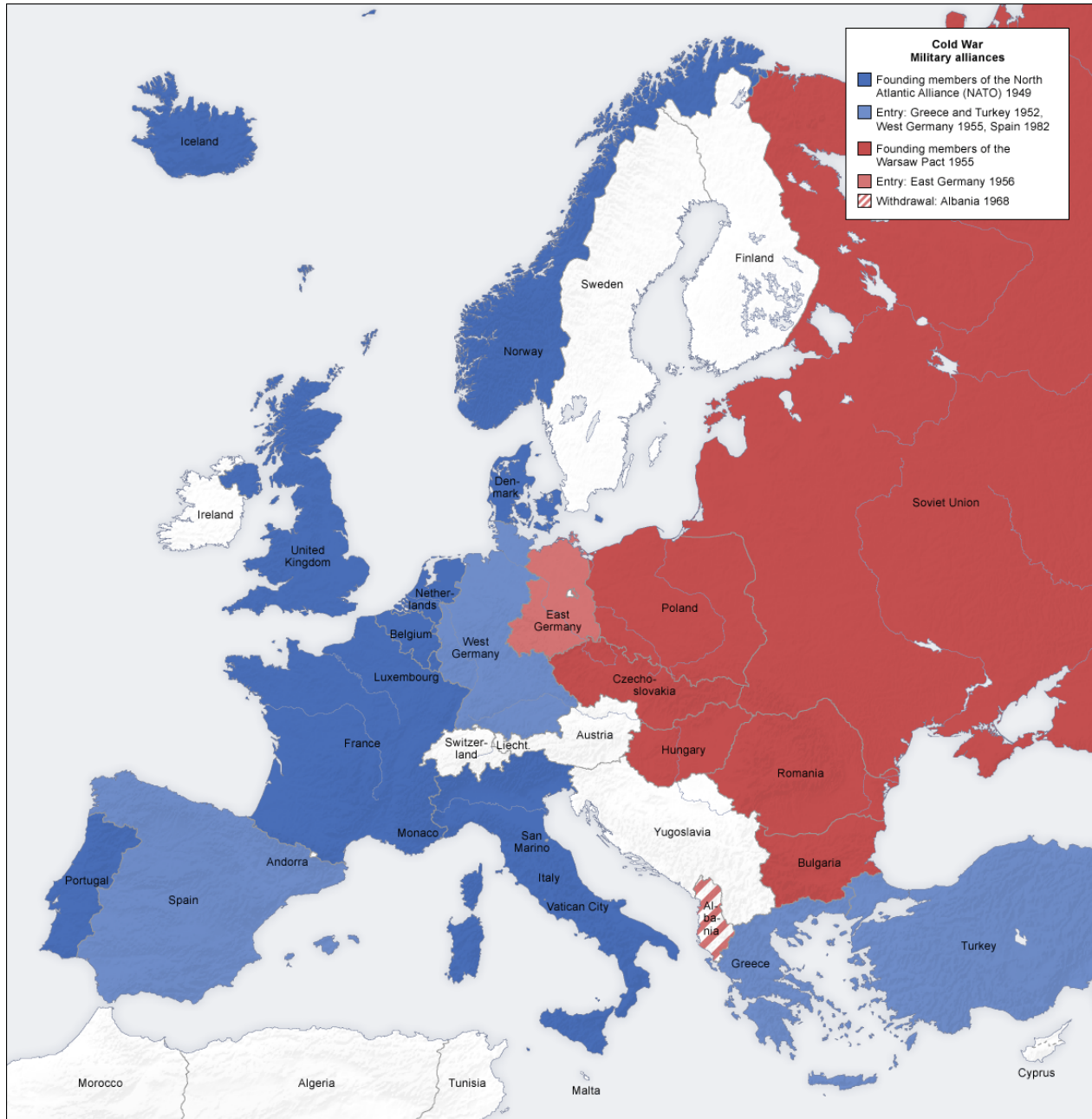


Figure 2. European military alliances during the Cold War. Designer: San Jose (2006). Data Source: Wikicommons. Based on Generic Mapping Tools.

contacts is noteworthy; collaborations spanned Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), Norden (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and were conducted between Norden and the three Baltic states or within the larger Baltic Sea

area (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden). The articles also show that vital relations could be small-scale and translocal, such as, for example, the link established by artistic mobility between the Swedish city of Gothenburg and the German city of Dachau. Thus, metaphorically speaking, one might say that the texts in this volume provide material for a topological mapping of Nordic-Baltic contacts and transfers conceived of as a map of metro,

et al., "Quantifying Reputation and Success in Art," *Science* 10.1126/science.aau7224; Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Cultural Translation or Cultural Exclusion? The Biennale of Sydney and Contemporary Art in the South," in *Regionality/Mondiality: Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*, eds. Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2014), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-25350>.

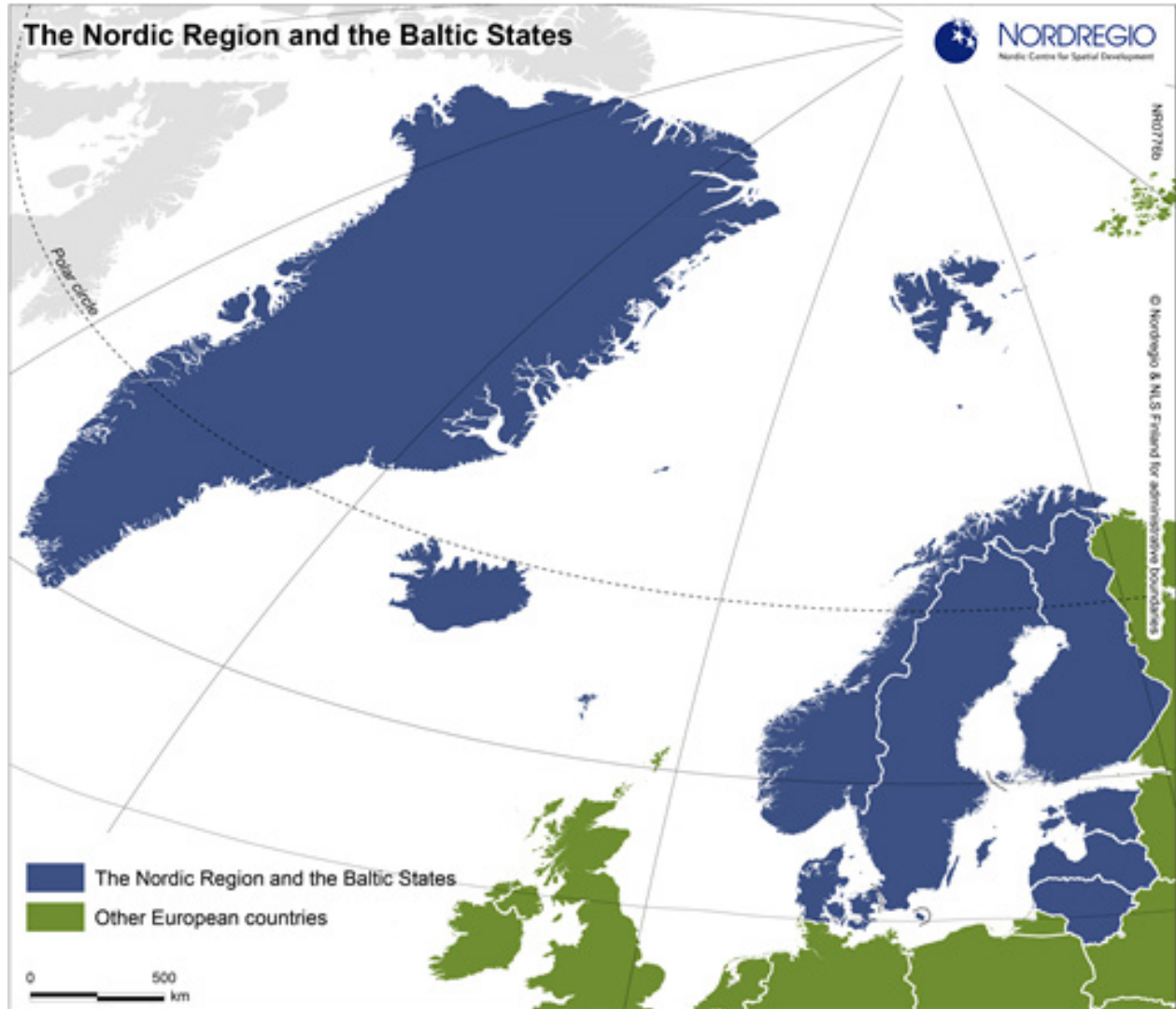


Figure 3. The extent of the Nordic Region as defined by the Nordic Council of Ministers, as well as the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Designer: Linys Rispling (2016). Data Source: Nordregio. No base map.

bus, and train routes. On such a map, large- and small-scale connections would be integrated and displayed irrespective of the relative dimensions of routes, the topographical distance, or the size of

locations. With no centroid logic that presupposes a fixed point of “gravity,” this map would illustrate the fascinating complexity of the functional and multidirectional relations of art and space.