Report on the Baltics:
Three Exhibitions in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn

Sjoukje van der Meulen

'The Meeting That Never Was', MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania, 22 August 2022 – 11 March 2023; 'Archaeologists of Memory: Vitols Contemporary Art Collection', Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia, 18 November 2022 – 9 April 2023; 'Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism', Riga Art Space, Riga, Latvia, 2 November 2022 – 15 January 2023

The Baltic states have been in strong solidarity with Ukraine from the day of the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022. Putin's imperialist war to redefine Russia's borders by invading a former Soviet country poses a real threat to the sovereignty of other post-Soviet states. It is no wonder, then, that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – which have been integral parts of the European Union for nearly two decades – are united in thinking, 'If Russia can do this to Ukraine, will we be next?' Like former Eastern Bloc countries such as Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, the Baltic states regained independence in the early 1990s and joined the EU and NATO in 2004, but as the only three post-Soviet states of the EU's twenty-seven member states, they share a unique history that also differs from other post-Soviet states such as Moldova, Ukraine and the South Caucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Under Soviet rule, the Baltic States were not so-called 'satellite states', ie sovereign states controlled by the USSR, but 'Soviet republics', ie legally part of the USSR as the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. This is also true of other post-Soviet states, such as Moldova and Ukraine (the latter a founding member of the USSR with Belarus and the South Caucasian states), but the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union occurred much later, in 1940, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. This may be common historical knowledge, but the unique status of the Baltic states in the European Union has been relatively underexposed in the context of art. Contemporary art from the Baltic states is often discussed on the margins of Central and Eastern European art history, which de facto means that 'post-1989' art from this region receives considerably less attention than art from the former Eastern Bloc countries, and this is related, at least in part, to their status as post-Soviet states.

This article discusses three recent exhibitions (spanning the second half of 2022 and the

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first months of 2023) at museums and centres of modern and contemporary art in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn, respectively – the capitals I visited in late 2022 during a research trip through the Baltic states. Together, these exhibitions covered the period from the 1950s to the present and provided insight into how art and art institutions in the Baltic states have responded to persistent questions of history, ideology and memory relevant to the entangled relationships between the (traumatic) past and the (unpredictable) present. The first exhibition was 'The Meeting That Never Was' (22 August 2022 – 11 March 2023) at the MO Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania, which revisited the cultural legacy of the Cold War by juxtaposing art from the collections of two European museums on opposite sides of the former Iron Curtain: Lithuania and the Netherlands. The second, 'Archaeologists of Memory' at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia (18 November 2022 – 9 April 2023), featured a selection of artworks from the renowned Vitols Collection of Central and Eastern European art since the 1960s, on the themes of history and memory in their intertwining with the present. And thirdly, 'Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism' (2 November 2022 – 15 January 2023), an exhibition at Riga Art Space organised by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA), was prompted by the historical realisation that the arduous transition from Soviet republics to the EU in the Baltic states may not be complete without a thorough decolonisation of (the influence of) the Soviet legacy and of human–environment relations.

'The Meeting That Never Was'

'The Meeting That Never Was' was held from 22 August 2022 to 11 March 2023 at the MO Museum, a private museum in Vilnius founded by the philanthropists Danguolė and Viktoras Butkus to house and exhibit their collection of Lithuanian artworks from the Cold War period to the present. The museum, which opened in 2018, was designed by the Polish-American star architect Daniel Libeskind who created a white modernist cube with post-modernist irregular recesses, forming curved lines, angular glass walls and sloping floors on the inside. The exhibition was on the top floor, where the interior space was redesigned by architect Justinas Dūdėnas and designer Juozapas Švelnys using temporary walls to create parallel corridors on the sloping floor with viewing and walk-through opportunities. The exhibition brought about artistic encounters between highlights from the MO Museum's collection of Lithuanian art and the collection of (Western) European and American art at the Van Abbemuseum, a Dutch museum of modern and contemporary art founded in 1936 and evolving in the postwar period.

The exhibition, curated by Charles Esche (director of the Van Abbemuseum), Gabrielė Radzevičiūtė (curator of the MO Museum)[1] and Anders Kreuger (curator of M HKA in

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[1] In the meantime, Gabrielė Radzevičiūtė changed positions and joined Vilnius's National Gallery of Art as a curator

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Antwerp), was based on the intriguing concept of retroactively establishing a (imaginary) dialogue between works of art that were never able to 'meet' due to the political and ideological conflict during the Cold War (1945–1991) between capitalism and communism, the United States and the USSR and their respective spheres of influence in Europe. A driving factor for Esche was to show that artists during the Cold War shared 'many similar responses and ideas' despite the forced separation, and to 'break the idea that there would have been no inter-European artistic dialogue'.[2] Radzevičiūtė added that the exhibition contained a critique of the Western canon of art history: 'One idea that is questioned… is the grand narrative by western countries that these are the leading artists and the stories, and the artists who were behind the Iron Curtain do not find a place in that narrative.'[3] The impenetrability of the physical and ideological boundary of the 'Iron Curtain' that separated East and West during the Cold War has long been debunked in art history by, for example, the art collective Irwin and scholars such as Amy Bryzgel and Piotr Piotrowski: cultural exchange between artists and movements took place in many ways. In Bryzgel's words, 'that curtain was decidedly porous'.[4] Eastern and Central European art historians have also filled in many 'gaps' in the Western-based canon of European art history.

Yet the challenge of this exhibition was to see what unexpected or hidden artistic dialogues might emerge from the confrontation of actual artworks in these two museum collections so marked by the antithetical aesthetics of Cold War culture and politics. The exhibition opened logically with paintings that unequivocally reflect the opposing cultural and aesthetic ideologies in the first decades of the Cold War: abstract modernism versus socialist realism. Augustinas Savickas's painting *Revolutionary Vilnius II* (1958), in which red flags are carried triumphantly through the streets of Vilnius, hung next to Morris Louis's painting *Number 1–71* (1962), in which vertical stripes of colour drip across a blank canvas. And Vytautas Mackevičius's large propaganda painting *Under Construction* (1976), which shows construction workers, both men and women, ready to help build the ideal socialist state, was hung next to Frank Stella's minimalist painting *Effingham I* (1967), which refers to nothing but its own logic of colour and lines and fits perfectly into the Western Cold War ideology of 'freedom'.

The gallery was further filled with works of art from the heyday of postwar American art, such as the industrially-produced minimalist sculptures of Carl Andre and Donald Judd versus paintings by Lithuanian artists who responded artistically to the scientific advances of the USSR, such as Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė's dystopic painting *X-Ray* (1977) of a woman lying straight

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2   See 'Major international exhibition "The Meeting that Never Was" at the MO Museum', *Echo Gone Wrong.com* https://echogonewrong.com/major-international-exhibition-the-meeting-that-never-was-at-the-mo-museum

3   As quoted by Richard Holledge in 'Revealing the lost art of Lithuania', *The New European*, 10 November 2022 www.theneweuropean.co.uk/revealing-the-lost-art-of-lithuania

4   Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2017, p 1

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Installation view of 'The Meeting That Never Was' at the MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania, with Augustinas Savickas, *Revolutionary Vilnius II*, 1958 (left) and Morris Louis, *Number 1–71*, 1962, photo courtesy of Norbert Tukaj

Installation view of 'The Meeting That Never Was' at the MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania, with Carl Andre's *Palisade*, 1976 (centre) and *Twenty-fifth Steel Cardinal*, 1974 (on the floor), and Marija Teresė Rožanskaitė's *X-Ray*, 1977 (on the wall), photo courtesy of Norbert Tukaj

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out on a futuristic doctor's table, and Lili Janina Paškauskaitė's portraits of the first dogs sent into space. The antithetical aesthetic of the Cold War was everywhere and seemed to follow the democratic logic of 'equal aesthetic rights' advocated by Boris Groys.[5]

As visitors zigzagged through the aisles of the exhibition, the contrast waned and the dialogue between artworks from East and West became more subtle, surprising and intimate, while Lithuanian artworks did, indeed, begin to claim their 'equal right' in history, with the quality of their work matching that of their Western counterparts. Yves Klein's blue monochrome was brought into dialogue with a bluish painting with earthy materials by Kazimiera Zimblytė, who, like Klein, wanted to create a spiritual experience of (painterly) space. And a portrait by Marlene Dumas, with her signature colour palette, hung opposite *Board Meeting Collective Farm* (1980) by the socialist realist painter Vincentas Gečas, an equally gifted colourist. The risk of an exhibition like this is that while artworks enter into an artistic dialogue based on formal affinities, context and content remain far apart. A former director of the Van Abbemuseum, Rudi Fuchs (who is well-regarded in the Baltics),[6] introduced this curatorial method of revealing aesthetic affinities by juxtaposing artworks. But in addition to such artistic affinities, this exhibition also highlighted the exchange of ideas and movements between East and West. Take *The Flying Dutchman* (1978) by Eugenijus Antanas Cukermanas, for example, in which a black rectangle is moved through time by the artist on a gridded canvas of otherwise whiter shades of gray; a carefully documented process executed with a conceptual rigour akin to On Kawara's series of date paintings, one of which, *Jan. 13, 1973*, could be seen further down the aisle. And art made by women was hung side by side, not forgetting but connecting, rather, the different contexts: for instance, the infamous feminist posters of the Guerrilla Girls were hung next to portraits of women captured by female photographers from Soviet-era Lithuania.

The curatorial approach to such staged encounters reinforced the message and thread of the exhibition that it is high time for such artistic dialogues to reflect on the past from the perspective of the present and possibly move forward. This thread culminated at the end of the exhibition, where a political version of a minimalist floor sculpture by Lithuanian artist Artūras Raila, *Stones and Chains* (1993) was placed on the floor in front of Thomas Schütte's deeply humorous but deadly serious *United Enemies: a Play in Ten Scenes* (1994), in which the German artist's photographed series of self-created humanoid caricatures seemed to evoke the seemingly endless debate between adversaries of the ideologically divided Cold War.

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5   See Boris Groys, 'The Logic of Equal Aesthetics Rights', in *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008), p 15

6   During my research trip, curators and artists shared positive stories and memories of Fuchs's visits to the Baltics during his directorship at the Stedelijk Museum (1993–2003), reaching out at just the right time

Installation view of 'The Meeting That Never Was' at the MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania, with (front left) Marlene Dumas, *Genetic Homesickness*, 1984, and (front right) Vincentas Gečas, *Board Meeting Collective Farm*, 1980, photo courtesy of the author

Installation view of 'The Meeting That Never Was' at the MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania, with Thomas Schütte, *United Enemies: a Play in Ten Scenes*, 1994, Van Abbemuseum collection (on the wall, back), and Artūras Raila, *Stones and Chains*, 1993, MO collection (on the floor); on the right is a painting by Rimvidas Jankauskas-Kampas, *All the Animals*, 1989, oil on canvas, 220 x 430 cm, also in the MO collection

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'Archaeologists of Memory'

While 'The Meeting That Never Was' focused on juxtapositions between artworks on both sides of the Iron Curtain made primarily during the Cold War, the exhibition 'Archaeologists of Memory', from 18 November 2022 to 9 April 2023 at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia, dealt with themes of history and memory through art from Eastern and Central Europe after the Cold War. Therefore, the two exhibitions go well together in terms of the period chosen, with some overlap in the 1990s. The post-socialist period is a given for 'Archaeologists of Memory', since the core of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection, founded by the Latvian couple Irina Vītola and Māris Vītols and containing about 1,000 artworks by 150 artists, is explicitly focused on art from post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular interest in art from the Baltic states. Kumu curator Eda Tuulberg was given carte blanche by the collectors to conceptualise and select the artworks.

Tuulberg took a quote from Walter Benjamin about memory as a conceptual starting point: 'Language has unmistakingly made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium… He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.'[7] Considering memory as a medium means examining it as if it were a language with a grammar and syntax that allow for different kinds of articulations. Or in the words of Andreas Huyssen: 'The past is not simply there in memory, but must be articulated to become memory.'[8] Tuulberg put the insights of Benjamin and Huyssen about memory in regard to history at the centre of her exhibition concept, as was further evidenced by her statement: If we wish to explore the past, we must be prepared to excavate in the strata of the past...' and also 'understand who is digging.'[9] In short, the artworks in the exhibition were selected for the way they expose, reflect, interrogate or otherwise 'articulate' and 'excavate' these complex layers of memory through visual means and artistic strategies.

Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevičius's work on history and memory immediately comes to mind in an Eastern and Central European context, and one of his key works, *The Head* (2007), was indeed on view. Narkevičius's film about the Soviet master sculptor Lev Kerbel (who sculpted the largest head of Karl Marx in history), to provoke debate about the precise status of Soviet-era utopias and symbols, was shown in the same space with a lesser-known but equally powerful video *Winter Which Was Not There* (2017) by the Georgian artist Vajiko Chachkhiani, in which a man, accompanied by his patient, unflappable dog, drags yet another colossal statue behind his truck until almost nothing is left of it – a kind of personal revenge and coming to terms with history. In a nearby space, the complex traumatic relationship between Soviet-imposed communism, on the one hand, and collective or personal memories, on the other,

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7   Eda Tuulberg, *Archaeologists of Memory: Vitols Contemporary Art Museum*, Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, 2022, p 5

8   Ibid, p 7

9   Ibid, p 8

is approached from a feminist perspective by the Polish artist Goshka Macuga in her installation *Death of Marxism, Women of all Lands Unite* (2013), which critiques Marxist partriarchy and also serves as a backdrop for a performance.[10]

Vajiko Chachkhiani, video still from *Winter Which Was Not There*, 2017, courtesy of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection

Goshka Macuga, *Death of Marxism, Women of All Lands Unite*, 2013, courtesy of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection, photo by Maris Raud

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[10] During the opening and vernissage, two female performers discussed Marxist theory; for a short description of this work by Goshka Macuga, see 'Goshka Macuga, *Death of Marxism, Women of all Lands Unite*, 2013' on the Tate Gallery's website www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/macuga-death-of-marxism-women-of-all-lands-unite-t14187

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One of the strengths of this exhibition was that the overarching themes of history and memory were brought down to the scale of human experience, often explicitly the personal memories and experiences of the artists themselves or the people around them. The exhibition opened, for example, with a video entitled *Romanian Kiosk Company* (2010) by Mircea Nicolae, an autobiographical narrative in the grey zone between memory, fact and fiction, in which the artist talks about himself and his family during Ceaușescu's dictatorship and the subsequent transitional period through photographs in which he slides back and forth on a red carpet, interspersed with documentary archival footage of Bucharest. Central to the (rather tragic) stories is the artist's father, who designed kiosks in Bucharest that were demolished along with other buildings in the city to make way for buildings of a new era. Another example is the video *Exercise* (2007) by the Slovak artist Lucia Nimcová, in which she asked people in her home town to do the morning exercises they had had to memorise under the communist regime and which is part of their collective memory and life experience. Their reactivated bodily memory shows how ingrained this Soviet discipline of forced healthy exercise still is in their bodies, but, at the same time, how differently these exercises are performed by each individual, showing that disciplining the body cannot turn off individual creativity. Nimcova's project is political in a gentle way, but she also captures these people's physical knowledge of communist rituals on video with the care of a cultural anthropologist.

Lucia Nimcová, video still from *Exercise*, 2007, HD video, 5 mins 52 secs, courtesy of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection

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Many of the works in the exhibition are already 'classics' within post-1989 Central and Eastern European art, but the point is that these high-quality works from the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection were brought together to offer simultaneous reflection and insight into the complex relationships between past and present. The exhibition could be called courageous in the current antagonistic climate in the Baltic states, because it seeks to promote reflection and counteract black-and-white thinking. Instead of excluding Russian artists, as in the other exhibitions discussed here, both Ukrainian and Russian artists were included in 'Archaeologists of Memory'. Among the Russian artworks was Dmitry Gutov's 2006 video *Thaw*, in which a man, the artist himself, tries to hold his own in a thawing and muddy landscape. Although the work clearly refers to the Khrushchev era, known as 'the Thaw', when the grip on society briefly relaxed after Stalin's death, the metaphor of falling and struggling to get back up transcends time, especially in a Russian context where recent history seems to have seen a coming and going of oppressive regimes, with a new low under Putin. Among the Ukrainian artworks was Rustam Mirzoev's painting *Two Wheels* (2012), in which two black car tyres turned purple by frost, towering over a thick layer of snow in an empty landscape, lose their innocence against the backdrop of the current war raging in Ukraine and the remnants of military vehicles lying all over the devastated landscape, often flipped over with their wheels up.

Dmitry Gutov, video still from *Thaw*, 2006, 3 mins 40 secs, courtesy of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection

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Rustam Mirzoev, *Two Wheels*, 2012, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm, courtesy of the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection, photo by Stanislav Stepaško

'Decolonial Ecologies'

The exhibition 'Archaeologists of Memory' encouraged reflection on history and memory, from the most personal to the abstract level, as was evidenced by a number of artworks that explicitly make the viewer think, such as the abstract painting *Perspectivnaya* (2009) by the Latvian conceptual artist Leonards Laganovskis, which graphically draws the viewer into tunnel vision, questioning one's own perspective, or the film *Swelter* (2009) by Krišs Salmanis that challenges the viewer's perception (does she or he notice the small changes that occur in the landscape?) – both important because memory is shaped by perspective and activated by perception. The third exhibition I want to consider, 'Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism', from 2 November 2022 to 15 January 2023, curated by LCCA curator Ieva Astahovska in the basement of Riga Art Space in Latvia, was a different kind of exhibition. It was more political and activist and in touch with current issues in a global context, even if it still had a clear regional focus and especially on the Baltic states. The postcolonial perspective of this research-based exhibition took a clear political stand against the war in Ukraine, or as Astahovska puts it: 'In Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region, decolonial approaches have gained new urgency with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, whose real aim is to restore the (imperial) power of the past.'[11] The current Russian invasion is thus a major reason why this exhibition

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[11]   Ieva Astahovska, *Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism*, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, Riga, 2022, p 7

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mobilises the term 'decolonisation', even though the term, developed in the context of the Global North and South, is applied here to a region outside the geopolitical eras usually associated with it, namely Central and Eastern Europe, or to what Martin Müller has called the 'Global East'.[12]

The exhibition included artworks that explored the impact of the Soviet era or the Russian occupation of Ukraine, including the stark intertwining of the two in the continuing grip of the past on the present. In the double screen video *The Enforced Memory* (2022), Maria Kapajeva shares her conflicting thoughts and agonising feelings – in short, the complex psychological effects evoked in her by the Estonian government's decision to have a monument to a Soviet tank removed in her hometown of Narva (on the border of Estonia and Russia) after the Russian invasion, which left her feeling threatened and horrified. However, the removal prompted her Russian-speaking fellow citizens to bring flowers and candles to the site to mourn the removal, as seen in one of the videos – a work that digs into many layers of memory and which would have fitted well into the 'Archaeologists of Memory' exhibition in Tallinn. But the decolonial approach of the exhibition in Riga was at once broader and more activist than a reflection on history and memory in light of the present, as it is also applied to humankind's relationship with nature, portraying humans as the oppressor and exploiter typically associated with colonial history, but equally guilty of exploiting the natural environment. In Astahovska's words, 'Decolonialism also offers new perspectives on the relationship between humans and the environment and calls for a change in our dominating and consuming influence on nature.'[13]

A thought-provoking installation in this context was Diana Lelonek's *Storks, a Sacred Bird* (2022), which shows on three interconnected, oblong screens how storks in Latvia find odd new habitats, such as at the Getliņi landfill in Riga, where, like gulls, they feed on junk food. Habitat loss due to agricultural excesses and climate change are known threats to the white stork, causing these large migratory birds to lose their basic food supply in the wetlands and open plains they usually inhabit during their breeding season. In Central and Eastern Europe, intensification of agriculture occurred during both the Soviet era and after EU accession. By portraying these beautiful storks in their awkward new habitat, combined with the 'real' trash from the site in a display case next to the tripartite screens, Lelonek's video raises unresolved ecological questions, such as 'How are the fortunes of Riga's humans and storks interconnected? Why have storks become seemingly addicted to junk food?'[14]

The postcolonial lens focused on socio-political and ecological issues after socialism, that is, in the post-socialist era from 1989 to the present. Many of the artworks approached Soviet heritage and ecological issues (the Baltic States have some unique nature) as interconnected in post-socialist space and time, and pointed to the need to address both in the present. In collaboration

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12   See Martin Müller, 'In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South', *Geopolitics*, vol 25, no 3, 2020, pp 734–755

13   Ieva Astahovska, *Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism*, op cit, p 7

14   Ibid, p 21

Diana Lelonek, *Storks, a Sacred Bird*, 2022, installation view in 'Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism' in the Riga Art Space, Riga, Latvia, photo courtesy of Madara Kupla

with two geographers, Inga Erdmane focuses on the serious and alarming ecological problems of the Baltic Sea, including the parts of it that were drained for intensive agriculture during the Soviet era.[15] This use has led to eutrophication (the growth of algae, which depletes oxygen in the sea) and other environmental hazards, threatening the ecosystems of the Baltic Sea which is now one of the most polluted waters in the world.

Erdmane has created a mixed-media installation, *Unless I Move, the Earth Becomes Flatter* (2021– 2022), which uses archival documents, such as a photograph documenting the political action *Prayer at the Sea* (1988) and the book *The Baltic Way to Freedom* (2005, crystallised or 'salted' by the artist), against the backdrop of a large poster-size photograph of the Baltic Sea. All this highlights that the political awakening and non-violent struggle for independence from the USSR across the Baltic states was closely linked to the Green Movement (Fig.12). The artist also organised a walk along the coastal area of Garciems (about 20 km from Riga) to educate people about these alarming ecological issues.

A fascinating project was the multimedia installation *Deep Sensing* (2002/2022) by the digital media artists Rasa Šmite and Raitis Šmits about the Soviet-made 32-metre radio antenna in the forests of Latvia (fig. 14). This long-time secret antenna, used by the Soviets for military and espionage purposes, was temporarily transformed into a sound laboratory by artists in 2001, ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, through a symposium on radio astronomy and sound art, 'RT-32: Acoustic Space Laboratory', in which Šmite and Šmits participated. In 2022, the artists returned to the Ventspils International Radio Astronomy Centre, or VIRAC, so named after the

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15 Since 2009, the EU has been committed to a programme to save the Baltic Sea region, see *EUSBSR: EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region* www.eusbsr.eu
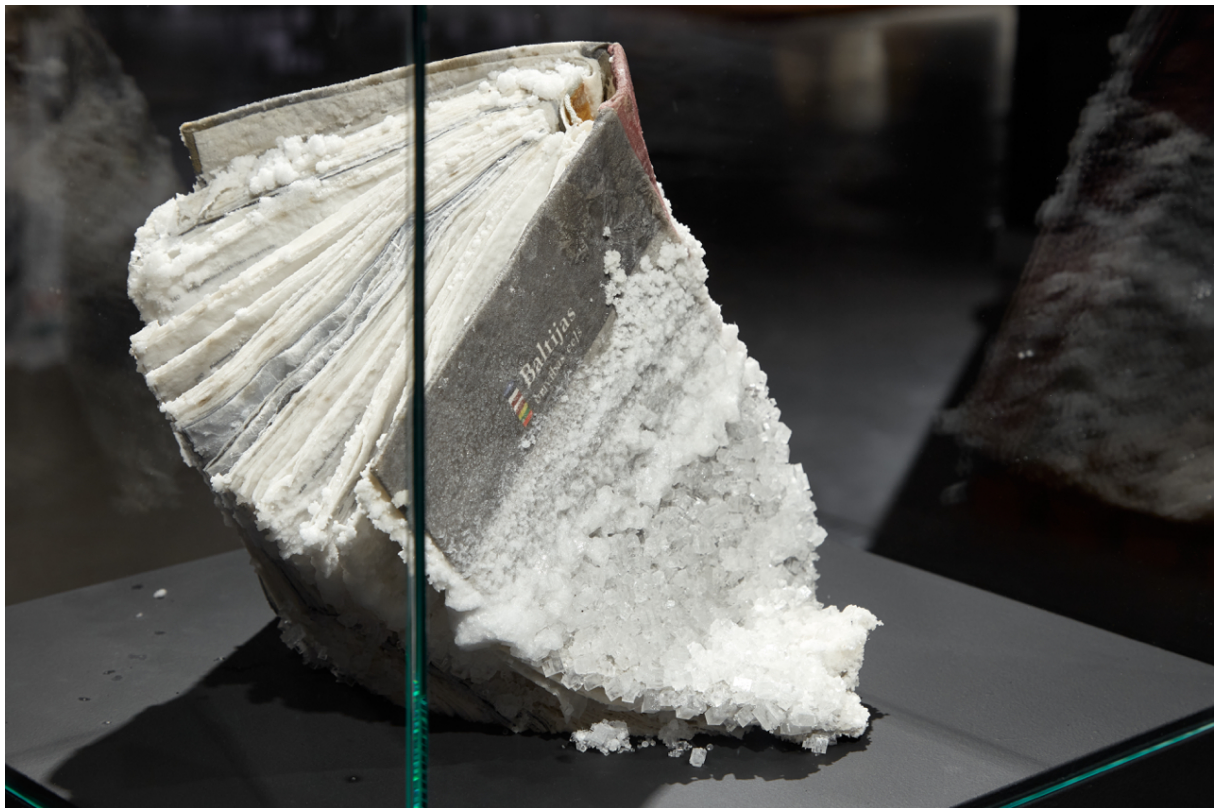
Inga Erdmane, *Unless I Move, the Earth Becomes Flatter*, 2021–2022, mixed media installation: photograph, archive materials from the National History Museum of Latvia, wool and amber thread, Baltic sea salt and book, photo courtesy of Madara Kupla

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Latvian scientists who took over the site from the Soviets in 1994, to see how far the now international team of scientists has come in using astronomy for climate change research, and in reusing the telescope for 'climatological observations from Earth to deep space', as the scientist Vladislavs Bezrukovs put it. One video, *RT-32, Acoustic Space Laboratory* (2002) was made twenty years ago and recounts the various stages and activities in the telescope's history, and another contains an updated interview with Bezrukovs, which together give hope for the future in which this Soviet legacy is constructively reused to address climate change. There was also a projection of a new work, *Deep Sensing* (2022), which appeared to be artistically-inspired digital visualisations of the changing patterns of signals captured by the telescope.

Rasa Šmite & Raitis Šmits, *Deep Sensing*, 2022 and *RT 32, Acoustic Space Laboratory (Part 2)*, 2002, in collaboration with Mārtiņš Ratniks, installation view in 'Decolonial Ecologies: Understanding Postcolonial after Socialism' in the Riga Art Space, photo courtesy of Madara Kupla

Criticism is possible, of course, of these three exhibitions in the Baltic States. The question is whether the first exhibition is timely now that tension between the old superpowers has flared up once again and the future of Europe is at stake. Dialogue now seems distant, both politically and artistically. However, most of the American masterpieces had never before been shown in Lithuania, so Lithuanian audiences could see them for the first time in their own country – surely an impetus for dialogue. A critical question that arises in relation to the last exhibition is that it included works from previously colonised countries in the Global South (the Caribbean, for example), without much attention to the vastly different (de)colonial contexts and histories with Eastern and Central Europe. How far does the term 'postcolonialism' extend before it loses its critical force and meaning, not to mention its historical specificity? At what point is a new vocabulary desirable and more appropriate to address unresolved legacies and conflicts in the

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present era? I chose not to focus on such critiques, but rather on the artistic content and messages conveyed by these three highly professional exhibitions, in order to highlight the cultural resilience and artistic energy in the Baltic States, which are deserving of attention in a global context and are also, quite simply, inspiring. Seen from this perspective, the cultural dialogue between museum collections in different parts of the EU does, indeed, leave much to be desired and still prevents a 'horizontal' approach (in Piotr Piotrowksi's sense) to European artistic legacies in the modern and contemporary fields.[16] Major museums in Europe and the US that have a growing interest in collecting Central and Eastern European art could (and probably should) take a cue from the Vitols Contemporary Art Collection for a substantive approach to building (or adding) to such a collection. There is certainly much to learn and gain from a broadened and reactivated postcolonial approach in new and contemporary contexts, such as the climate crisis, Central and Eastern Europe and unfinished business in the European Union and beyond.

Sjoukje van der Meulen received her PhD from Columbia University (New York, 2009) and has taught at Columbia College, the University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Oregon and the University of Amsterdam. She is currently Assistant Professor of modern and contemporary art at Utrecht University and was Rudolf Arnheim Visiting Professor at Humboldt University in Berlin (2020/21). She was formerly editor of *Metropolis M*, and co-editor-in-chief of *Stedelijk Studies*, the online scholarly journal of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2019–2020). Her current research interests include contemporary art in the European Union (1992–now), and recent publications can be found at https://artmargins.com/situated-solidarity/ and www.metropolism.com/en/reviews/47262.

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16   See Piotr Piotrowski, 'Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-garde', in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, Sascha Bru et al, eds, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2009, pp 49–59