AICA XXIII Congress in Moscow and Tblisi 1989

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The Baltic connection

Violets with Guidelines (1919) is a watercolour by the mysterious Swedish pioneer of abstract painting, Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) - an artist whose hidden, and partly forgotten, work created a minor international sensation when it was first shown to the public a couple of years ago. The watercolour is a beautiful metaphor of the links between the Baltic and Nordic cultures. In the top left corner of the painting is the Baltic violet, on the right the Danish, in the centre the Swedish and correspondingly at the bottom are, on the left, the Finnish and, on the right, the Norwegian violets. To af Klint, who was more of a Theosophist than a botanist, the flowers presumably symbolised different spiritual dimensions.

The Baltic states and the Nordic countries, and the entire Baltic region have over the millennia and the centuries grown into an organic cultural whole. The cultural relationship is, however, characterized by both continuity and discontinuities, dramatic reversals and regressions. Most recently in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the Baltic states were annexed to the Soviet Union, they also in practice became cut off from their ages-old interchange with the cultures around the Baltic Sea. They began to be run from Moscow; they were Sovietized and to an extent Russified with crude measures. The Great Power took the small coastal states under its sway, as foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov put it in 1940 to the Lithuanian deputy prime minister Vincas Krévé-Mickevičius: "When the Russian tsars from Ivan the Terrible onwards sought a seaboard on the Baltic Sea, their efforts were not based on any personal quest for power, but on a national imperative. It would be unforgivable if the Soviet Union did not now take this opportunity, which may perhaps never

come again." Molotov continued: "You have to be realistic to the extent that you comprehend that in the future small nations will disappear. Your Lithuania, together with the other Baltic peoples, including Finland, will be incorporated into the venerable family of Soviet peoples."

One theme of the AICA XXIII congress in Moscow and Tblisi is to chart the probable development of art in the final stages of this century. Looking into a crystal ball rarely brings results, but if the policy of reform continues in the Soviet Union, quite realistic forecasts can be made as regards the future of Baltic-Nordic cultural relationships. It is feasible that this interchange will increase manyfold over the next decade, and that the Baltic states will play a role commensurate with their weight - if not a greater one - in this development.

The culture and history of the Baltic States - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - is an amazingly complex spectrum of different traditions. Latvian and Lithuanian belong to the Baltic branch of Indo-European languages together with Old Prussian, which died out in the 17th century, while Estonian belongs to the Finno-Ugric family. The Lithuanian language is often seen as the Sanskrit of Europe, because it is a very archaic language.

Historically, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Sweden and Russia have all in turn viewed the Baltic states as relevant to their national interest. In Latvia and Estonia the German, Swedish and, later on, the Russian influence has been the most pronounced, while Estonia has had a special linguistic and cultural relationship with Finland. Lithuania has been a battleground for the Poles, Germans and Russians. Yet, Lithuania's independent history is significant; it has had its own period of greatness, together with Poland in the 15th and 16th centuries, when its territory extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

The healthy obstinacy of the Baltic states is an expression of the fact that they were the last in Europe - the Lithuanians as

late as the 1250s - to convert to Christianity. Nowadays, the States differ in their faiths: the Estonians and Latvians are mainly Lutherans and the Lithuanians Catholics.

In the 13th century the German-led Hanseatic League linked the coastal towns of the Baltic Sea into a large economic and cultural whole. Of the important Hanseatic towns, Riga was founded in 1201 and Tallinn in 1219. In the 17th century, Courland, now southern Latvia, developed under the leadership of Duke Jacob into a naval power, with colonies in Gambia in Africa and Tobago in the West Indies. In addition to trade, university education has a long history in the Baltic region. Vilna University, which is the oldest in eastern Europe, was founded in 1578, and Tartu University was started on the orders of the Swedish King Gustav Adolphus in 1632.

Despite the individual features of each Baltic land, they also had a lot in common, which is shown for example by the fact that, throughout the period of Russian dominance starting in 1710, 'Baltia' was seen from St Petersburg as a single entity, an area separate from Russia. The Baltic States became independent simultaneously, in 1918, yet lost their independence in the tumult of the Second World War. Also, the Baltic States have reacted as a relatively united front to the current perestroika of the Gorbachev era. Each has a powerful national movement which accelerates and maintains the policy of reform:in Estonia the "Rahvarinne", in Latvia the "Tautas fronte" and in Lithuania "Sajudis". These countries have reinstated their traditional national flags, and have passed new language laws and legislation on greater economic and political autonomy.

The population question is a burning issue in Latvia and Estonia. In 1935 75% of the population of independent Latvia were Lettish, whereas nowadays they only make up just over half. Estonians represented 88% of the population in 1934 and 65% today. The formerly multinational minorities have changed primarily for

Russian populations. In cities like Riga and Tallinn the Russians may even constitute the majority.

The visual arts in the Baltic States have mainly been western oriented, having much in common with the art of the Nordic countries, especially in the development of Estonian and Latvian modern art: for example, national realists and symbolists of the early part of the century, like Janis Rozentals (1866-1917) and Nikolai Triik (1884-1940) and the Cubist-Constructivist experimenters of the 1920s like Romans Suta (1896-1944), Eduard Ole (1898-) and Arnold Akberg (1894-). Lithuanian art has the longest traditions, which flourished dramatically in the visionary art of the National Romantic Symbolist Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis (1875-1911). His closest counterpart in Nordic art could be the Icelandic sculptor and painter Einar Jónsson (1874-1954). Bold colourism and structural Expressionism are standard features of the newer Lithuanian painting, as in the works of Vincas Kisarauskas (1934).

In this context it is impossible to present in depth the modern art of the three different countries, so I will limit myself to using Estonian art as an example. It is also the best known in Finland.

In Estonian art two parallel traditions can be distinguished: Constructivism and literary mythology. The exhibition of contemporary Estonian art, *Structure/Metaphysics*, shown this year in Finland and West Germany, reflects this dichotomy. Constructivist-Cubist thinking was characteristic of the Estonian Modernists of the 1920s and '30s, and to this tradition has been added the avantgardism of the 1960s and '70s. In the Estonian context, the concept of 'avantgardism' often means no more than an alternative to official art. Many Estonian avantgardists of the younger generation are trained architects, and also work, like Jüri Okas, Leonhard Lapin and Vilen Künnapu, both as artists and architects. Apart from architecture itself, they are

interested in graphics, painting, installations, land art, performances and architectons/architectural sculptures.

Jüri Okas' (1950-) land art projects, which feature radical cross-sections, spatial transpositions and powerful exploitation of perspective, plus the pragmatic use of material, are related to the analytical aesthetics of the Americans Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978) and Robert Smithson (1938-1973). Okas executed several of his land art works of the late 1970s on the beaches of northern Estonia, but the reductionist, deconstructive approach was already part of his graphic works of the early 1970s. In the spring of 1989, at the Helsinki Art Hall, Okas constructed a spatial work called *Furrow* out of asphalt, soil and neon lights.

If Okas' art, which developed in a remarkably independent manner, draws from western sources, then the art of Leonhard Lapin (1947-), whose *Sign* series (1979-1982) can be seen in the slide on the right behind Okas' work, is rooted in the East, primarily in the aesthetics of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935). The artist's *Suprematist chair* (1986) is a tribute to the Russian avantgardist. The work is made up of a simple blue diagonal element, which is fixed to the backrest of a chair. The chair itself, with its square black seat, dates back to the heyday of avantgardism at the beginning of the century. Also, the black figures in Lapin's painting *Sunset of the Western World* (1988) are hammering in the Russian avant-garde manner. In contrast, Lapin's sawdust, book and plywood cube installation, *Noah's Ark*, (1989) at the Helsinki Art Hall was very Finnish, at least in terms of its materials. The consciousness of the absurd and the drive to produce meaning makes it very Estonian.

The de Chirico-like architectons *Monument to the horse* (1988) and *Figure no. 1953* by Vilen Künnapu (1948), who is one of the leading Estonian contemporary architects, convey well the metaphysical charge in Estonian art. Künnapu writes of the metaphysics of his hometown, Tallinn:

> "One aspect of Tallinn's *genius loci* is Nordic metaphysics. When you walk the streets of Tallinn you feel at some moment, at some place, that something is essentially different ... In the grey fog a man in a felt hat walking round an advertising stand, a tree growing out of a sombre-coloured slate wall, an unexpected bend in a narrow street, a wave splashing against a prison wall from the time of Peter the Great, an abandoned airport on a high slate embankment, a geometrical public convenience on the edge of the forest, dejected animals in back yards ..."

Lembit Sarapuu's (1930-) painting *Kalevipoeg in the Underworld* (1988) encapsulates the literary-myth art of Estonia. Kalevipoeg is the hero of the Estonian national epic and also a much-used theme in art. Estonian moral sensibilities are projected onto his often fantastic exploits. Jüri Arrak (1936) is another Estonian pictorial storyteller, whose fairytale-like paintings *The Trumpeter* (1980) and *City of Towers* (1979) also contain much of Künnapu's Tallinn metaphysics.

The art of Raul Rajangu, who was born in 1960 and comes from the small town of Viljandi, combines an analytical approach with Estonian mythology. Thematically, strategically and technically, Rajangu has developed his own language. His art has its roots in the Soviet utopias of the 1950s, which promised a future of harmony and material well-being. Rajangu has not himself lived the late-Stalinist idyll, but he has imbibed the ideology in his childhood. In addition he has studied old periodicals and borrowed from their pictorial material. Rajangu is an artist with a directly social orientation and in this respect, too, an exception in the Estonian art world, being perhaps closer to many of his Muscovite colleagues.

Rajangu's works are based on a mixed-media technique: they are not really paintings but rather painted reliefs. The artist makes many of the elements of his work out of a special pulp, which makes them more object-like. Aesthetically Rajangu's strategy is

related to David Salle's fragmentary, semiotic and deconstructive approach and to Anselm Kiefer's historicism, and the pictorial investigation of his nation's past and repressed elements of the subconscious.

In his work, *Courting on the steps of their own house* (1986), Rajangu depicts a couple in a prosperous idyll with many details. Yet, innocence and security are confronted by menace and death in *The snowman over the anatomy institute* (1986), in which a bride and groom, a Moskovich car, a snowman, a New Year fir tree, a wreath, children's drawings and two toothbrushes are fragmentary elements of the picture. The exhaust and windshield of the Moskovich are blood red.

Days at Artek (1989) is Rajangu's view of an elite Pioneer camp in the Crimea, the object of the expectations and hopes of the children of the 1950s. On the right of the picture is the radiant coastline of the Black Sea and on the left a young woman sits on a sofa. On her dress, as on the sofa, are painted happily playing children, the carefree life of the Pioneer camp. In the centre is a small palace with a ~~red~~ black flag on the roof. ~~But~~ If and the burial mound in the sky and the rat-eaten edge of the mural destroy the idyll. Apart from harmony, the references to death, horror and terror are reiterated themes in Rajangu's art, as for example, in his works *Greetings to Tartu*, *Ravila 3* (1985) and *The arrival of the artist R. Rajangu and his assistants at Viljandi* (1988).

Rajangu takes a more lyrical approach in *A summer night in Kadriorg Palace* (1987), which is a relief depiction of one of the ornamental tile ovens from Estonia's national gallery - Kadriorg - almost in the original size. In front of the oven is a green Russian lorry, and overhead a pennant sticks out. Rajangu's art is also greatly indebted to Pop Art; in his first work, *The sewing machine and the New Year fir* (1984), he absurdly juxtaposes the objects, which are distended in Oldenburgesque fashion.

In Raul Rajangu, Estonian culture has acquired a sharp, discerning observer.

The increase in interchange between peoples gives rise to both uniformity and the need to recognize distinctions. In the integrating Europe of the 1990s the art and culture of the Baltic States will make their own enriching contribution.

(Translated by Michael Garner)