

# Cultural Production and the Canonisation of LGBT Histories in the Baltic States

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines three exhibitions held in the Baltic States that laid claim to being the first LGBT exhibitions that engaged with national history and identity in their respective contexts. These exhibitions include: *From Dusk to Dawn: 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* (Vilnius, Lithuania, 2013); *Untold Stories* (Tallinn, Estonia, 2011); and *Slash: Between the Normative and the Fantasy* (Rīga, Latvia, 2015). In my analysis I interrogate how these exhibitions critically engaged with transnational debates in LGBT and queer politics, while reflecting local understandings of national and sexual identity – as evidenced in the exhibitions’ curatorial strategies, catalogues and curatorial statements, and in the artists and artworks presented.

## ABSTRAKTI

Artikkelissa tarkastellaan kolmea Baltian maissa järjestettyä näyttelyä, joita pidetään ensimmäisinä kansallista historiaa omissa konteksteissaan käsittelevinä lhbt-taidenäyttelyinä. Ne ovat *From Dusk to Dawn: 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* (Vilna, Liettua, 2013), *Untold Stories* (Tallinna, Viro, 2011) ja *Slash: Between the Normative and the Fantasy* (Riika, Latvia, 2015). Analysoiden näyttelyiden kuratoinnin strategioita, näyttelykatalogeja, kuratointijulistuksia, esillä olleita taiteilijoita ja heidän teoksiaan tarkastelen sitä, kuinka nämä näyttelyt osallistuivat kriittisesti transnationaaleihin keskusteluihin lhbtq-politiikasta, samalla kun ne heijastavat paikallisia käsityksiä kansallisesta ja seksuaalisesta identiteetistä.

## Introduction

In his 2018 article “Contemporary Art and Alternative Queer Archival Strategies in Central and Eastern Europe,” Polish art historian and curator Paweł Leszkowicz describes how in the post-communist region of Europe, the state has the dominant role in “shaping and ideologically controlling historical commemoration,” which with the rise of conservative nationalism it has been accompanied by a “fixation on a heroic or traumatic national past” (2018, 74). In the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – this can be exemplified in the promotion of national culture and language in the frame of 100 years of independence, celebrated in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This form of nationalist celebration leaves little room for voices silenced from official rhetoric, such as local LGBT communities. However, counter-archival strategies employed through queer curatorial methods have, as Leszkowicz notes, the power to challenge official narratives through affective modes of knowledge production, “imbuing historical data with active intimacy and activist fervour of transformation” (2018, 90).

<sup>1</sup> The Baltic States celebrate two separate independence days – one celebrating the initial independence from the Russian Empire in 1918 and a second celebrating the restoration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1990/1991.

An example of one such strategy comes in the form of 100 Days of Pride, organised by the Rīga, Latvia based LGBT-rights non-governmental organization (NGO) *Mōzaika* as a part of Baltic Pride 2018. Coinciding with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first declaration of Latvian independence in 1918, 100 Days of Pride directly linked national memory of independence and freedom to that of individuality and celebration: “we celebrate independence and freedom of each individual with 100 events over 100 days of the 10<sup>th</sup> Baltic Pride” (Mozaika 2018, 6). Events held during these one-hundred days included workshops, talks, speed dating, film screenings, and a photo exhibition. These events can be understood as a community-building strategy – through engaging young activists and community workers, allies, and older LGBT Latvians that lived through the final years of the Soviet Union. However, as the organisers note, Latvia remains in last place in the European Union (as of 2018) in terms of LGBT rights and “[t]he majority of Latvian politicians choose to ignore every attempt to create positive change for the LGBTI+ community in Latvia” (Mozaika 2018, 6).

To date, there has been no comprehensive study of LGBT art and historical exhibitions held in the Baltic States. This gap in scholarship is not due to a lack of subject matter: since 2000, there have been more than twenty exhibitions, running the gamut from solo shows to group exhibitions held in a variety of venues including small private galleries, museums, cafes, restaurants, and cultural centres across the three countries [for a fuller picture of the exhibitions that have taken place, see Appendix 1]. In this article, I focus on three specific exhibitions labelled as “firsts” – as the first LGBT or queer group exhibition – in their respective countries: *From Dusk till Dawn: 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* (*Nuo sutemų iki aušros: 20 LGBT laisvės metų Lietuvoje*, curator Laima Kreivytė), held at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2013; *Untold Stories* (*Sōnastamata Lood*, curators Anders Hārm, Rebeka Pōldsam, and

Airi Triisberg) held at the Tallinn Art Hall in Tallinn, Estonia 2011; and *Slash: Between the Normative and the Fantasy* (*Šķērsvītra: starp normatīvo un fantāziju*, curators Kaspars Vanags and Gary Everett), held at Kim? Contemporary Art Center in Rīga, Latvia in 2015.

These exhibitions have several characteristics in common: they featured a variety of artistic media and styles; they were framed in dialogue with larger discourses of gender and sexuality, both in their home countries and transnationally; and, they were described under the signifier of “first.” Aside from being labelled as the first LGBT or queer group exhibition in their countries, they were also firsts in terms of their locations in cultural institutions and galleries; the sponsorship they received from local political and cultural organisations as well as support from foreign embassies and cultural institutes; and how they framed their narratives within local history.

The research questions that inform my analysis are: how did these exhibitions attempt to link LGBT identity to national history and belonging; and, how did they engage with larger theoretical debates in curatorial, feminist, and queer studies in Central and Eastern Europe at the times they were held? To give context to this analysis, I first sketch the theoretical background to queer curatorial practices, including the influence of feminist curating that first arose in the Baltics in the 1990s, and the theoretical propositions that carried over to LGBT exhibitions beginning in the late 2000s. The exhibitions I examine herein stand in for and represent LGBT history, which is frequently, though not always,

absent in the public spheres of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia.<sup>2</sup> Here I also query how the three exhibitions interact with and reflect understandings of national and sexual identity – both through curatorial strategies and artworks, and the theoretical framing of each exhibition. In particular, *From Dusk till Dawn* positions itself as a point in a historical trajectory in Lithuanian (LGBT) history, beginning with the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, tentatively passing through Baltic Pride 2013, and onward to a presumptive brighter future.

In contrast, both *Untold Stories* and *Slash* straddle the line between curating LGBT history and reflecting queer critiques of identity, community, and (hetero)normativity. *Untold Stories* was framed around the “intensive public debates” on “the same sex partnership law, adoption rights and the legal situation of lesbians and gays” (Härm et al 2011, 2) in Estonia, while exhibiting works that reflect conversations around sexual minorities already present in the local arts scene. In comparison, *Slash*’s inclusion of artists from Western Europe and North America alongside Latvian artists can be seen as an attempt at building queer community transnationally, positioning LGBT Latvians as part of a larger whole surpassing national borders. Finally, as this article is one part of a larger research project, I conclude with methodological questions for the future as well as a few observations based on my research thus far.

2 There have been a number of more recent projects recordings the oral histories of LGBT individuals across the three countries, including the work of artist Jaanus Samma, referenced herein. See: Rita Ruduša, *Pagrīdes citādība. Homoseksuāļi Padomju Latvijā (Forced Underground: Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia)* (Riga: Apgāds Mansards, 2012); Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš, eds., *Queer Stories of Europe* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016); Riika Taavetti, ‘Discovered Queer Desires: Rereading Same-Sex Sexuality from Finnish and Estonian Life Stories of the 1990s,’ *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 28, no. 2 (May 2019): 205–234.

## Notes on Terminology: Baltic, LGBT, Queer

In contemporary terminology, “Baltic States” refers to the three countries that lie on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania [see Fig. 1]. Over the centuries the region has been subjected to numerous feuds and battles between great empires, from Germany to Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and Russia. Three periods inherently define Contemporary Baltic identity. One, the National Awakenings of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries during which Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians began to produce literature and songs in their native languages

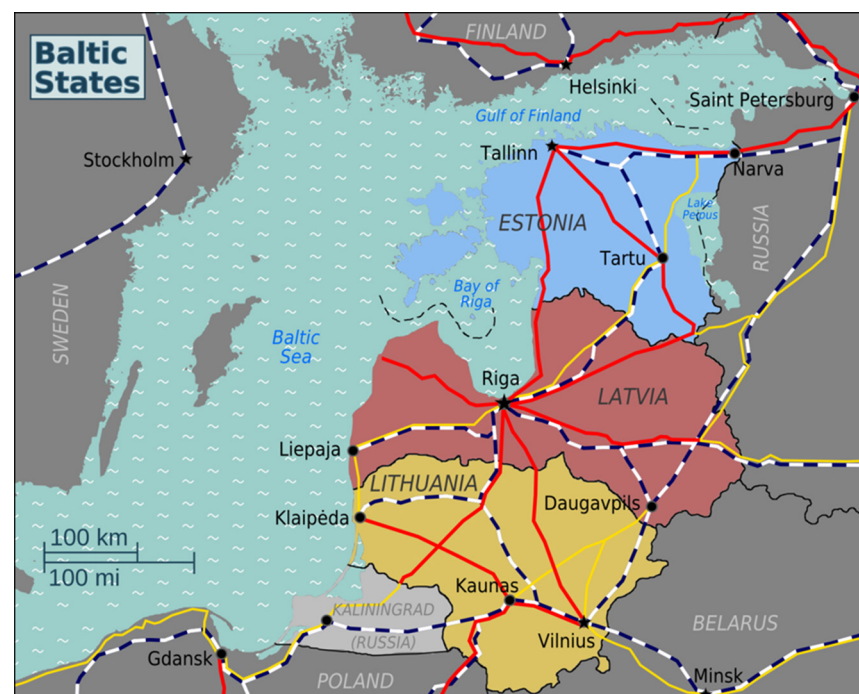


Fig. 1. Map of the Baltic States. Creator: Peter Fitzgerald, with alterations by Travelpleb, 13 March 2009. Original URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baltic\\_states\\_regions\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baltic_states_regions_map.png). Used under Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0.

and understand their identities in national terms.<sup>3</sup> Two, the first periods of independence for the three nations that began at the end of the First World War and ended with German and Soviet occupations during the Second World War, though it must be noted that the three countries were distinct in their development as independent countries. Three, their shared histories of Soviet occupation, which initially included armed resistance and mass deportations to Siberia. Armed resistance was followed by mass migrations of people from elsewhere in the Soviet Union, resulting in significant shifts in the demographic make-ups of Latvia and Estonia, where the populations of the capitals became heavily Russified, a feature that still exists today (Mole 2012, 50–80).

Furthermore, the silence that surrounded homosexuality in the Soviet Union can tentatively be linked to current perceptions in local populations that homosexuality is foreign. While homosexuality was de-criminalized in independent Estonia at some point between 1929 and 1935 (Kalkun 2018), after the annexation and occupation of the three Baltic States beginning in 1940, punishments for homosexuality included hard labour in the GULAGs of Siberia (Healey 2001).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the three countries joined the United Nations (1991), the European Union (2004), the Eurozone (Estonia in 2011; Latvia in 2014; Lithuania in 2015), the Council of Europe (Estonia and Lithuania in 1993, Latvia in 1995), and NATO (2004). As a part of their entry into the Council of Europe, Latvia and Estonia decriminalised homosexuality in 1992 and Lithuania in 1993 (Szulc 2017, 211).

3 For a more comprehensive history of the three nations, see: Michael North, *The Baltic: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (London: Red Globe Press, 2017).

As a part of the accession treaties each country signed in order to join the European Union, they were required to implement specific non-discrimination policies in employment and protections for minorities based on the EU's Copenhagen Criteria (Petz 2016). In comparison to other European Union states, Latvia and Lithuania remain among the most hostile to LGBT rights on the continent. In the 2020 Rainbow Map by the pan-European LGBT NGO *ILGA-Europe* ranked Lithuania as 33<sup>rd</sup> and Latvia as 41<sup>st</sup> out of 49 European countries based on legislation and legal protections for LGBT individuals (ILGA-Europe, n.d.). Estonia ranks higher at 21<sup>st</sup> place and has a form of partnership legislation in place, though the enabling acts have yet to be passed.

Furthermore, there has been considerable backlash over the past two decades in relation to public expressions of LGBT identity and the organisation of Pride marches. In particular, the early marches held in Tallinn, Estonia and Rīga, Latvia in the early 2000s were subject to campaigns of violence and attempts by local authorities to ban marches, in spite of the nations' commitments to the Right to Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Expression as a part of the Council of Europe and European Union. In Lithuania, legislation was passed in 2010 that forbids the public dissemination of information counter to that of the traditional nuclear family and the family as enshrined in the Lithuanian constitution – in effect, banning the positive promotion of LGBT rights and families in the public sphere. While the bill was ostensibly aimed at “protecting” minors, it has had the effect of stifling public discussion of non-heteronormative sexuality and has been used to threaten those who speak openly about LGBT rights.<sup>4</sup> It is in this hostile atmosphere that Baltic Pride first formed.

4 The leading LGBT NGO in Lithuania, *LGL*, makes mention of three such cases, mainly focused on the broadcasting of commercials for Baltic Pride 2013. See: LGL, “LGBT\* Rights in Lithuania,” [https://www.lgl.lt/en/?page\\_id=199](https://www.lgl.lt/en/?page_id=199).



After the violence that Prides in Estonia and Latvia faced, organisers from both countries as well as representatives from Lithuania met in Sigulda, Latvia in 2008 to collaborate and pool their resources. The first Baltic Pride was held in Rīga in 2009 with hosting duties rotating among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania each year (LGL 2016, 9).

In regard to the general public, the abbreviation LGBT is widely understood in the Baltic States, particularly in the context of partnership rights and same-sex marriage and frequently appears in local media. LGBT is also included in the names of Estonian and Latvian NGOs: for example, in the names *Eesti LGBT Ühing* and *Association of LGBT and their Friends Mozaika* both feature “LGBT” in their local languages and English translations. Books written by and for the LGBT community frequently include glossaries that define LGBT through translation, along with other terms including asexual, polyamory, intersex, and pansexual (Davidjants 2010; Zabarauskas and Femina 2016, 244–245). Identity categories that exist in Western Europe and North America are understood and used by locals in a variety of ways, though research on the diffusion and circulation of these identities in a Baltic context is currently lacking.

Queer, on the other hand, is mainly used within the academic and cultural spheres and is not understood by the general public. In the curatorial statement for *Untold Stories*, the curators acknowledge the limited reach of queer, noting that “the concept of queer has had little impact, and has predominantly been employed within the framework of academic studies” (Härm, Põldsam, and Triisberg 2011, 2). Furthermore, there is the question of whether queer or queer theory is appropriate to a given context. As Polish sociologist Joanna Mizielińska notes in her analysis of queer theory’s impact in Finland, local scholars have suggested that queer theory as a field has been predominantly focused on American-centric conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality and do not always map neatly onto other

geographical contexts (Mizielińska 2006, 95). Furthermore, there is an academic bias towards citational practices that skew heavily towards the Anglo-American world – in other words, for local scholars to be taken seriously, they must be able to reference critical strains of thought in queer theory rather than producing their own forms of knowledge. Mizielińska notes that “Queer does not mean the same things in other languages as it does in English. Retaining an English term can be questioned as being a very sophisticated but empty gesture” (Mizielińska 2006, 88–89). In the context of this article, I use the terms as used within the exhibitions themselves – for example, *From Dusk till Dawn* uses LGBT while *Untold Stories* uses LGBTQI. However, I do acknowledge the potential pitfalls of bringing “queer” into a Baltic context and only engage with the term when used by local scholars.

## Theoretical and Methodological Propositions

### From Feminist to Queer Curating

In order to address the history of LGBT and Queer exhibitions in the Baltics, it is essential to acknowledge the debt that is owed to feminist curatorial practices that both influenced and have worked in dialogue with queer curation. Only one significant academic collection addresses feminist curation in Central and Eastern Europe, *Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe* (Kivimaa 2012c). This anthology features articles that examine feminism in the context of Central and Eastern Europe as a region, the Balkans (with a focus on the countries of former Yugoslavia), Latvia, and Poland. Most notably, Estonian curator and academic Katrin Kivimaa presents the first pan-Baltic examination of feminist curatorial and artistic practices in her article “Rethinking

our im/possibilities: Or do the Baltic states need feminist curating.”<sup>5</sup> In the article, she notes the pressure that contemporary art institutions in the Baltics faced when attempting to integrate into a larger international contemporary art scene:

The tropes of Westernisation and internationalisation functioned as primary determinants in the process of creating and developing a new field of multidisciplinary, topical, and theoretically advanced contemporary art. The fact that the modelling of this new field depended on the pre-existing structures and trends of Western (global) art aided those desiring to make feminist exhibitions with certain legitimacy. (Kivimaa 2012a, 77.)

However, as Kivimaa notes, the absence of political feminism or activist movements in the Baltics were used in “anti-feminist counter-arguments” which claimed that such discourses were impositions from outside the region (Kivimaa 2012a, 77). She goes on to discuss a number of feminist art exhibitions that were held in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that tapped into international discourses on feminist art and curation but were “paradoxically framed by disavowals of feminism which, as it was argued, had no relevance in local culture” (Kivimaa 2012a, 70–71). In effect, they were configured within an international contemporary art context – where feminism was an overriding concern for a number of cultural workers – while attempting to remain legible within their own national contexts.

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5 Kivimaa has also been involved in transnational conversations on feminism and gender in contemporary art, having taken part in the symposium portion of the major feminist art exhibition *Gender Check* in Warsaw in 2010. Kivimaa spoke alongside other major feminist art historians including Serbian curator (and curator of *Gender Check*) Bojana Pejić, American academic Amelia Jones, and Lithuanian curator Laima Kreivytė.

She further notes that there has not been a wholesale change in institutions in the region since the 1990s – instead, there are only a handful of academics and curators who continue to work with feminist critiques, and there are even less who do it as a sustained practice (Kivimaa 2012a, 70). Most notably, the perception of the proper function of art, as an example of aesthetic quality, continues to inflect contemporary debates. She gives an example of how

the questions of inclusion, exclusion and power relations as fundamental factors in social practices of making exhibitions or writing art histories, continue to be sidelined or regarded as ‘externally’ imposed demands of political correctness by many representatives of both older and younger generations of art historians and curators. (Kivimaa 2012a, 71–72.)

This perpetuates the view of what the value of the cultural object is its form and aesthetics rather than the way art is representative of social or political concerns of a given theoretical discourse – be it feminist or queer.

Finally, Kivimaa notes how the emergence of gay/lesbian activism in the Baltics has had an impact on “on some art projects responsible for re-politicising the practices of making and curating art” (2012a, 92). In making this claim she specifically references *Untold Stories*, stating that its curatorial agenda was paradoxically two-fold: one, to include “positive representations of the emergent LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex) community” in the region while highlighting practical concerns of the local community such as partnership legislation, whereas the curatorial theme of the exhibition “relied predominantly on an anti-identitarian agenda of queer theory and took a critical stance against the discourses of normalisation and assimilation” (Kivimaa 2012a, 92). While this may seem contradictory, I argue later in this article that this is characteristic of a number of exhibitions of the time – they sought to reflect local social

and political concerns while tapping into the critical power of queer theory to denaturalise essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality. This, as I propose, is due to the ambitions of these exhibitions: they were labelled as the first of their kind and had the responsibility to speak both to a broader audience – in particular, the local LGBT community – and to speak critically in contemporary art and academic discourses present internationally, including queer theory and queer curatorial practices.

This begs the question: what exactly is queer curating? One way of approaching this question is through the re-reading of archives and the historical record. A 2010 special issue of the Scandinavian LGBTQ studies journal *Lambda Nordica* entitled “Queer Methodologies,” takes up this approach, examining how queer theory can be used as a tool for doing ethnographic fieldwork, the impact of affect theory on queer scholarship, and doing queer in activist archives and museum spaces. One particular strategy used by curators is approaching the collections of major institutions in order to read for “queerness” where it has otherwise gone unacknowledged. In his article “Queer in the museum: Methodological reflections on doing queer in museum collections,” Swedish curator Patrik Steorn addresses the question of knowing what to look for and “looking queerly” in institutions that are formed on the basis of national heritage and culture. Steorn points to two methodological issues when doing queerness in collections: one, looking “for objects that might reveal queer presences” in order to address how museums produce normative categorisations such as style, period, and locality; and two, reconfiguring institutions in order to “elaborate the productive role of non-normative desire and affective attachment in the practice of queer interpretation” (Steorn 2010, 121).

Steorn cites the work of art historian James Sanders who notes how traditional museums have the inability (or perhaps, lack of political will) to incorporate discussions of the political and social context of artworks and

artists into exhibitions alongside aesthetic representation as categories of critical analysis (Steorn 2010, 124). This is reflected not just in curatorial and display practices, but also in the way that artistic works are organised within museum collections. For example, when Steorn asked the National Museum in Stockholm for images that could be considered gay/lesbian or had queer figures as subject matter, the museum responded that they collected based “on grounds of artistic quality” – in effect, the institution was characterised by an inability to break out of traditionalist modes of collection and presentation. As he notes, this is not a new critique of institutions – feminist art historians were asking similar questions in the 1970s, particularly in relation to “how the term ‘quality’ was used to exclude certain artworks from the art historical canon” (Steorn 2010, 125). What a queer approach to museums brings is the ability to understand artworks and other cultural objects from a different point of view – one tied to “different emotional and political attachments to objects” (Steorn 2010, 131).

Here Steorn proposes constructing an alternative archive, rather than reconfiguring the normative structures of the museum or gallery; this archive would “consist of interpretations of artworks or other objects that have been queered and appropriated by an LGBT audience, and which holds narratives about affective knowledge and queer desires” (2010, 130). However, I contend that before such an archive of queerness can be constructed, a few specific requirements must be met: one, the capability to compile a set of works that can be understood by both audiences and academics as “queer”; two, framing an exhibition within geographical boundaries in order to make “queer” local; and three, the choice of an institution that will allow such critiques to carry cultural and political capital. The first requirement, the capability to compile a set of works, has a much to do with the methodological approach one takes to collecting and curating as it does to gaining access to museum archives – which requires

navigating bureaucracy and potentially hostile administrators and staff with their own political agendas. The act of compiling these works can thus be understood as an act of canon-building, where the canon exists outside and in juxtaposition to official narratives of cultural and historical value.

### The Canon and the Nation

Polish sociologist Robert Kulpa references the idea of building queer canons within his text “Nationals and Sexualities – ‘West’ and ‘East.’” Here he cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument from *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) where she discusses the difficulty of relating gay and lesbian studies to the English literary canon (Kulpa 2011). Kulpa takes this further, noting that the incorporation of gay and lesbian subjects into “state-controlled institutions (as, for example, in the case of ‘sexual citizenship’), albeit at the expense of radicalisation and Islamophobia, could be read as the reshaping of the social canon” (2011, 48). This “reshaping of the social canon” has the effect of shifting the boundaries between who is and is not included in official narratives of national identity, be they cultural, political, or literary. He proposes two different ways of looking at this move. One exists as more of a top-down normalisation described as “writing homosexuality into an existing master narrative by dominant nation-state discourse” or *canonising homosexuality*. This can be juxtaposed with a grassroots/activist approach he refers to as *homosexualising the canon* or “writing homosexuality into the existing national master canon of history by sexual dissidents – lesbian and gay subjects themselves” (Kulpa 2011, 48). This allows the objects of discourse, in this case, LGBT individuals, to become the subjects of discourse: the active producers of knowledge rather than the products of it. This recuperative move, as Pawel Leszkowicz notes, can also be understood from the perspective of democratic participation: “From this point of view, the queer visual critical interventions into the communist archives conducted by artists might be read as a representative

of recent acts of empowerment and democratisation, regaining or reparation of memory” (Leszkowicz 2018, 89–90).

Furthermore, Kulpa acknowledges the difficulty that queer theory has with the idea of nation and national identity. In contemporary scholarship, there is an overriding tendency to view nationalism as a normativising force, either through Lisa Duggan’s (2003) concept of homonormativity – the neoliberal incorporation and subsequent depoliticization of white, affluent gay men into consumptive culture – or through Jasbir Puar’s (2007) conceptualisation of homonationalism – the bringing into nationalism of gay/lesbian proper subjects and the “othering” of queer people of colour, particularly those who are from the Middle East and Muslim. However, such critiques are inherently biased in their locations within a North American and Western European context and do not take into account small nations in Central and Eastern Europe that are not imperial powers and have been the object of neoliberal policies, rather than the producers of such dynamics. In this context, Kulpa presents a negative perspective of how nationalism is understood in queer theory, stating:

What is so necessarily wrong with the willingness to be recognised as a part of a national community, to build one’s own identification in relation to other nationals and to not be left aside as encapsulated and self-contained, ab/sub/ob/ject (2011, 56)?

He further describes how claims to nationalism by gays and lesbians can be understood as both a recuperative move and one that challenges the monolithic perception that nationalism belongs to right-wing political actors. Rather than ceding national identity to those who seek to erase lesbian and gay subjects from national belonging, “lesbian and gay communities in [Central and Eastern Europe] and elsewhere may well embrace national ideas as one of the methods of their struggle” (Kulpa 2011, 56).



However, I wish to caution that this does not necessarily mean that an expansive form of nationalism, one that Kulpa gestures towards, will automatically open the boundaries of who belongs within the idea of the nation. As I discuss later in this article, the curators of *Untold Stories* have been particularly critical of the ways that nationalism has been taken up by gays and lesbians in Estonia, and how such discourses are often inflected with xenophobia and racism.

Furthermore, this continual emphasis on the nation and national identity as the frame through which gender and sexuality can be understood is particularly characteristic of the exhibitions I discuss herein. Much of this has to do with the role that the state has in promoting cultural institutions. Paweł Leszkowicz notes that across Central and Eastern Europe, “cultural and historical organisations rely almost exclusively on the state’s financial support” (2018, 71). In effect, the capital available to explore cultural heritage resides almost exclusively within the bureaucratic structures of states that are characterised by “increased conservatism and nationalism, which is typically homophobic” (Leszkowicz 2018, 71). Leszkowicz proposes queer archives and queer memory as counter-institutions and alternatives to these forms of exclusion; however, they are also predicated on sustained and sustainable funding sources. In this context, the question of whether LGBT or queer exhibitions can escape the frame of the nation becomes almost impossible to imagine – particularly given the continued marginalisation that these communities face across Central and Eastern Europe.

## Methodology and Context

My main methodological approach to studying these exhibitions has been through visual and critical discourse analysis, looking to the exhibition catalogues, websites (including those archived via the Internet Archive’s

Wayback Machine), critical reviews, news articles, and photo galleries. My research in the Baltic States began only in 2016, so I have only had “access” to these exhibitions through their material traces left in documents and in photographs, rather than through my own experiences visiting the spaces. However, I am very familiar with the three institutions discussed herein and have visited their galleries on a number of occasions. I also wish to note that there is an imbalance in the material available for the three exhibitions: while *From Dusk till Dawn* and *Untold Stories* released publications containing the names of the artists and artworks involved, *Slash* was not accompanied by a catalogue. My analysis of the works included has come from examining a series of photos taken for the exhibition as well as references on artists’ websites. As such, my discussion of *Slash* herein is as much about critiquing its theoretical foundations as it is an attempt to fill in the gaps in terms of the staging of the exhibition itself.

In turning to my analysis of the three exhibitions, what becomes most prominent is how they reflect the social and political contexts of their time. In particular, *From Dusk till Dawn* was very much marked by the experiences of the local community during the first Baltic Pride march in Vilnius in 2010. The theoretical background of *Untold Stories* was inflected by questions around the idea of family, community, and nation. In contrast, *Slash* was very much connected to the internationalisation of gender and sexuality – both through its role in EuroPride/Baltic Pride 2015 and in the inclusion of artists and works from across Europe and North America.

### ***From Dusk till Dawn*: sexuality and gender in/through the state**

*From Dusk till Dawn: 20 Years of LGBT Freedom in Lithuania* opened on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2013 at the Contemporary Art Center (CAC) in the Old Town district of Vilnius and ran until the 6<sup>th</sup> of August. A part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride 2013, the exhibition was labelled as the “first

exhibition of queer history and culture in Lithuania” (Kreivytė 2013a, 5) and featured artworks in a variety of media including photography, performance art, video, print, and textiles. The exhibition was organised by Lithuanian academic and curator Laima Kreivytė, who is well known in the cultural sector in the country and incorporates feminist and queer methods into her curatorial practice and writing. Notably, all thirteen artists included in the exhibition were Lithuanian. *From Dusk till Dawn* also featured two parallel exhibitions – a solo exhibition of Aušra Volungė’s photographs at the Marija and Jurgis Šlapeliai House-Museum, and Virgilijus Šontā’s photographs at the Modern Art Centre, which ended a week after *From Dusk till Dawn* closed. *From Dusk till Dawn* also included several events such as a poetry reading by the American poet Eileen Myles as well as a queer poetry night and the exhibition opening, which included a performance of Eglė Ganda Bogdaniienė’s “Trans-parade: gender (changing) fashion,” a collaboration with the students of the Vilnius Art Academy.

The exhibition was divided into two separate sections – the CAC’s reading room was used as a space for historical and archival documentation of the local LGBT community, while the works of art were displayed in the basement gallery of the Center. While the use of the basement space was initially due to the rest of the building being previously promised to the 15<sup>th</sup> Vilnius Painting Triennale (Griniūtė 2015), the curatorial strategy made use of the underground nature of the space as representative of the Lithuanian LGBT community’s social position. In discussing the choice to juxtapose the two spaces – history on the ground floor and cultural production in the basement – curator Laima Kreivytė described the decision as follows:

That is why the exhibition sites – the reading room and ground floor hall of the Contemporary Art Centre – are symbolic in their own way. One of them is (a)light, the other is associated with vaults, the

underground, and the first gay bars. The reading room hosts the documentary part and artworks related to conceptual contemplation on the history of LGBT [...] The basement is hiding and at the same time, revealing the images of non-normative sexuality in Lithuania’s contemporary art and artistic strategies of queering – questioning of the norms. the major topics are gender performativity, homoerotic beauty of the body, being together, and the critics of patriarchal institutions. (Kreivytė 2013b, 45.)

Here the choice was to bring history out into the open for both the LGBT community and other visitors to see. Included in the exhibition was a timeline of events printed on translucent vinyl and adhered to the windows of the CAC’s reading room. The timeline, just like the exhibition, was predicated on an origin point being the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Lithuania in 1993.<sup>6</sup> Here the ability for the community exist in the public sphere is directly linked to the legal mechanisms of the state – in effect, the state having the power to deem a group of citizens as no longer criminal and perhaps worthy of basic rights.

The timeline also included documentation of prominent historical events for the local community, including the publication of the first LGBT magazines in the country, theatre performances, TV interviews, and important events in the fight for equal rights. Most notably, the timeline refers to two events of censorship that preceded the exhibition, one in 2006 and the other in 2009. The first involved a photograph of a gay couple by Ugnius Gelguda that was excluded from an exhibition by students of

<sup>6</sup> Homosexuality had been criminalised in Lithuania since the Tsarist period of the Russian Empire and subsequently carried over into the first period of independence from 1918–1940 and the Soviet occupation until 1991. 2013 was also the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Lithuanian Gay League, the largest LGBT-rights NGO in Lithuania.

the Vilnius Art Academy that was held in the small western Lithuanian town of Juodkrantė. The second incident occurred as part of the “Artists for Human Rights” exhibition held by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009 when photographer Akvilė Anglickaitė’s photo series on transsexuality was excluded.<sup>7</sup> As Kreivytė notes, these two incidents “sparked off the most considerable debate on censorship in Lithuania at the end of 20th century” (2013b, 47). In direct response to the censorship, Kreivytė included Anglickaitė’s work in an exhibition at Gallery Kairė-Dešinė called “For Human Rights with No Censorship” (Kreivytė 2013c, 41). Both of the censored works were included in *From Dusk till Dawn*.

Furthermore, the exhibition acted in a “conceptual dialogue” with *Ars Homo Erotica*, a major exhibition curated by Paweł Leszkowicz and held at the National Museum in Warsaw, Poland in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Unlike *From Dusk till Dawn*, *Ars Homo Erotica* was characterised by the recuperative move it attempted to make in terms of re-contextualising the museum’s collection through a “homosexual perspective” (Leszkowicz 2012, 141) – and through the inclusion of art from across Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and Russia. *Ars Homo Erotica* also featured four Lithuanian contemporary artists in the programme including Remigijus

Venckus, who would be featured three years later in Vilnius. The exhibition’s goals, as the curator described, were

to represent the volatile nature of queer politics in Eastern European countries through artistic expression. Queer activism and art that developed in the region, functions at the very centre of the social and political struggle for LGBTQ rights, freedom of expression, and democracy. (Leszkowicz 2012, 142.)

Notably, the exhibition was held alongside Warsaw Pride and EuroPride, an annual pan-European Pride celebration that rotates among host cities across Europe. 2010 represented the first time that EuroPride had been held in a location in Central and Eastern Europe.

Drawing a link between *Ars Homo Erotica* and *From Dusk till Dawn*, there were a handful of shared artists across both exhibitions, including the aforementioned Remigijus Venckus as well as a work by Adomas Danusevičius entitled *Somewhere in the Bush*, a direct nod to a photograph by the Russian group Blue Noses that had appeared in the Warsaw exhibition (Kreivytė 2013b, 49). Similarly, Paweł Leszkowicz in a brief discussion of *From Dusk till Dawn* notes the role that photography played in activating archives of memory. Referring to the inclusion of photographs of nude men by artist Virgilijus Šonta, Leszkowicz states:

They document the transitory freedom and eroticism of gay/ nudist beaches at the time when male homosexuality was still illicit. Thus archival traces are hidden in many genres of art, especially in portraits and nudes which need to be rediscovered and reinterpreted in a queer way by artists and curators. (Leszkowicz 2018, 85.)

Here the conceptual dialogue between exhibitions is reciprocal, predicated on the understanding of the power of the image as a form of memory-making rather than simply memory activating.

7 The term “transsexuality” appears in the English translation of the catalogue and appears to be a direct translation of the Lithuanian “transseksualumas.” It should be noted that this term has fallen out of favour and has been replaced by “transgender” in most English contexts over the past two decades. See: Laima Kreivytė, *From Dusk till Dawn: 20 Years of LGBTQ Freedom in Lithuania* (Vilnius: 2013), 38; 41.

8 The exhibition was also notable for the support of Polish academic Piotr Piotrowski, who was head of the Museum at the time. He would later resign after the Board of Trustees refused to accept his plans to reconfigure the museum in line with his strategy of developing the institution as a “critical museum,” or one aligned with critiquing the museological construction of national identity. It is also speculated that the impetus behind the plan’s rejection was his support for *Ars Homo Erotica* (‘Piotr Piotrowski About His Resignation from the Polish National Museum’ 2010).

The social context of exploring the previously “underground” or illicit extends to many of the essays within the exhibition catalogue. The essays also reflect both an anxiety and optimism for the exhibition and Baltic Pride 2013. This anxiety reflects the traumatic experiences that many in the community faced during the first March for Equality of Baltic Pride 2010, where marchers were considerably outnumbered by counter-protesters while the march was forced to be held on a small, desolate street across the river from the older part of Vilnius.<sup>9</sup> In the lead up to Baltic Pride 2013, local organisers fought the city to hold the March for Equality in the centre of the Old Town on Gedimino Prospektas, the main street linking the *Seimas* and the symbolic Cathedral Square. In her essay in the exhibition catalogue for *From Dusk till Dawn*, gender studies scholar Margarita Jankauskaitė reflects on this shift, noting how “the dusk that enwrapped the community” previously, particularly in the threat of exposure, had now receded and was accompanied by “the community [making] demands for public, symbolically significant spaces,” thus “[reflecting] a complex transformation of values” (2013, 9). While this demand for visibility acts as the *raison d’être* of the exhibition, the tension of the past remained an indelible part of its presentation.

The inclusion of photographer Vsevolod Kovalevskij’s *InVisible* reflects the difficulty of presenting the past within the frame of the present. The work consists of black and white photographs and audio documentation of the March for Equality route from 2010, acting as a form of “spectre” or haunting of that event. In her curatorial statement, Laima Kreivytė links Kovalevskij’s work to the exhibition’s title, describing how the “work displays a junction of history and its artistic reflection.” She then connects

9 This experience is well documented in Darja Davydova’s essay “Fragmented Subjects: The Changing Face of the Lithuanian LGBT Community in Public Discourse,” included in the publication *Changing Faces: First March for LGBT Equality in Lithuania* (Vilnius: LGL, 2012).

this to the physical act of moving through the exhibition, noting that “[b]y climbing the stairs from the basement to the reading room, the viewer will not just symbolically come out, but will steer the wheel of LGBT history – from dusk till dawn” (Kreivytė 2013b, 51).

Other essays in the exhibition catalogue reinforce this movement from the dark to the light. In Nida Vasiliauskaitė’s essay “Why it is Necessary to ‘Demonstrate’ Homosexuality,” she makes direct reference to the controversies over Baltic Pride 2010 and the perception in the general public that being open about one’s non-normative sexuality is a provocation. She outlines the major changes in Lithuania since the first coming out stories appeared in local media in 1995 through the 2007 controversy over a truck paid for by the EU and emblazoned with the slogan “For diversity. Against discrimination” as well as the notorious 2009 Law on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information. The law, as Vasiliauskaitė notes, was “aimed at “cleaning” public space from anything that is not heteronormative” (2013, 23) and forbids the dissemination of representations of “non-traditional” family configurations in media. Notably, it remains in the Lithuanian legal code today.

Vasiliauskaitė also points to the power, and danger, of visibility, noting how to be open about one’s sexuality in Lithuania is seen as an attack or “an aggressive infringement upon the ‘nature’ of the heteronormative mainstream” (2013, 25). In contrast, Dalia Mikonytė describes the dynamics of LGBT visibility in Lithuania through a series of “misunderstandings,” beginning the first attempts to register the Lithuanian Gay League – where the Lithuanian form of the term “gay,” or *gėjus*, was similar to the name of a lake and resulted in official confusion as to what the organisation was representing (2013, 27). These misunderstandings, as she describes, encompass the sometimes-successful attempts at beginning a dialogue in the country, as well as the acts of censorship in the local arts scene.



Finally, the exhibition catalogue actively engaged with queer theory. In his essay “Queer Discomfort,” sociologist Artūras Tereškinas cites Sara Ahmed’s notion of discomfort in his desire to be seen and to live “otherwise” to the heteronormative majority. He explicitly links this to the inability or rather lack of desire to conform to societal expectations as well as the discomfort of living in a country where one cannot remake themselves based on their self-perception of identity. Referencing Ahmed, Tereškinas states:

[T]hose who live such lives do not seek comfort; on the opposite, they uphold discomfort regarding all aspects of normative culture by the way they live. Ideally, they have no families, don’t marry, don’t mate, don’t give birth to and don’t raise children, don’t join neighbourhood watch groups, don’t pray for the nation during war. Because otherwise they would be supporting the exact ideals that make queer lives failed and intolerable. (2013, 13–15.)

This stands in opposition to much of the exhibition, which is firmly embedded within the framework of progressive politics and human rights. Rather than fighting for visibility and acceptance, Tereškinas argues for a form of counter-politics that is based on discomfort – both discomfort of the self and discomfort of the “normative” majority.

Laima Kreivytė also proffers queer understandings of the works in her curatorial statement. In particular, she describes the origins of the exhibition’s title, *From Dusk till Dawn*, as inspired by the 1996 American vampire film of the same name directed by Robert Rodriguez. Picking up on the figure of the vampire, she points out how it represents “an allegory of transformation, of a shifting non-normative identity” that has the potential to transform others: “Isn’t it what society is afraid of? That everyone who sees gays and lesbians, and communicates with them, will become the same as them?” (Kreivytė 2013b, 43). In her text, Kreivytė

also makes the theoretical move to bring “queer” into Lithuanian through the use of the Lithuanian word “kreivas” meaning wry or curve.<sup>10</sup> She goes on to describe queer as

not defining, but criticising identity, its stiff essentialistic construction. Moreover, queer may function not only as a noun (referring to a person of non-traditional sexual orientation), but also as an adjective (referring to weirdness, circumflection, deviation from the norm) and a verb, referring to a subversion of the dominating (hetero)norm, “defamiliarization” of standard images, rejection of gender stereotypes and critique of the patriarchal system. (Kreivytė 2013b, 43.)

While it is important to understand this anti-essentialist position in regard to the exhibition – particularly given Kreivytė’s clarification later in her essay that not all artists included in *From Dusk till Dawn* identified as LGBT – this stands in contrast to the exhibition’s slogan that reinforces a normative perception of time and progress as linear. Included in both the physical representation of the chronology placed on the windows of the CAC reading room and at the end of the timeline presented in the exhibition catalogue, the slogan reads: “The (hi)story has not yet ended – you are invited to fill it!” (Kreivytė 2013c, 41). While I understand this optimism as an attempt to portray the future – from the vantage point of 2013 – as being more open, progressive, and free, as of the writing of this article the challenge has yet to be taken up by other exhibitions or cultural projects in Lithuania.

<sup>10</sup> While “kreivas” has not been taken up as an alternative to LGBT in Lithuania, the term is also found in the name of the Vilnius Queer Festival “Kreivės,” a film festival founded in 2014. At this juncture, I am uncertain if there is a direct connection to Kreivytė’s essay.

## *Untold Stories: From LGBT to Queer Politics in Estonia*

The oldest of the three exhibitions was *Untold Stories* (curators Anders Härm, Rebeka Põldsam, and Airi Triisberg), held at the Tallinn Art Hall in Tallinn, Estonia from 8 May to 26 June 2011. It featured twenty-eight artists from Estonia, Finland, Germany, the United States and Denmark. The exhibition was conceived of as a part of Tallinn's designation as a European Capital of Culture for 2011 and received support in the form of funding from the EU, and the "Diversity Enriches" programme of the City of Tallinn. Unlike *From Dusk till Dawn* and *Slash*, *Untold Stories* was not directly connected to Baltic Pride, though the exhibition's run did overlap with Baltic Pride 2011 in Tallinn. The exhibition catalogue makes a note of this, providing a short description of Baltic Pride and the local OMA Festival,<sup>11</sup> as well as links to the festival programming. The exhibition was international in scope, including artists from the United States, Finland, and Germany, alongside Estonian artists. The exhibition also featured a speakers' series including artist talks, a lecture by academic Robert Kulpa, and a screening of the Latvian documentary *Homo@LV* (dir. Kaspars Goba, 2011), which depicted the aftermath of the first pride march in Rīga in 2005.

The stated aim of the exhibition was two-fold: one, to "provide a fragmented insight into the social, cultural and political life of LGBTQI people"; and two, "to take a critical stance toward the discourses of normalisation and assimilation that frequently accompany attempts to win recognition by the majority of society, thus referring to the points of dispute within the LGBTQI movement itself" (Härm, Põldsam, and Triisberg 2011, 2). In

11 The OMA Festival was an arts festival that was held concurrently with Baltic Pride in Estonia in 2011 and 2014. It included an open-air concert and was the replacement for the Baltic Pride marches that did not take place when Baltic Pride was first hosted in Tallinn.

an interview with Katrin Kivimaa, co-curators Rebeka Põldsam and Airi Triisberg acknowledge the seemingly contradictory nature of attempting to represent both a normative/assimilationist viewpoint as well as a critical/anti-identitarian perspective. Triisberg notes that there was a concerted effort to present "positive representations of LGBTQI subjectivities" in the exhibition, connected to discussions with local activists and "something quite typical for queer/feminist cultural and political projects happening in the region of Eastern Europe – with the agenda of mainstreaming gender and sexual difference" (Kivimaa 2012b, 204). In contrast, the curators were also interested in interrogating more theoretical issues, including how to incorporate queer and feminist theory into an exhibition when these discourses are primarily relegated to academia. They also sought to address some of the larger problems with mainstream LGBT politics in Estonia including "nationalist and racist, but also anti-feminist and trans-phobic attitudes" held by gays and lesbians in the country (Kivimaa 2012b, 204).

*Untitled Stories* can also be understood as a reflection of the social and political situation in Estonia at the time: proposals for partnership legislation were being debated in the political and media spheres of the country while local activists were engaged in their own debates over the merits and detriments of holding a pride march.<sup>12</sup> The curators acknowledged the complicated nature of these debates in their curatorial statement, articulating the critical position that the "exhibition aims to direct attention at the processes of multiple marginalisations that occur within minority groups, posing questions about possible alliances between queer struggle and other social movements" (Härm, Põldsam, and Triisberg 2011, 2).

12 Further background on the partnership legislation debates can be found in sociology Kadri Aavik's article "Negotiating Uncertainty: Sexual Citizenship and State Recognition of Same-Sex Partnerships in Estonia" in the book *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Two pieces in the exhibition help to illustrate some of these larger theoretical and practical concerns. The first is Jaanus Samma's *Stories (Lood)*, a series of audio interviews with older gay men that lived through the Soviet period. These interviews have a dual purpose – one, recording the lived experiences the older generation who lived and loved through the occupation; and two, as documentation of the spaces of desire they inhabited, including parks, bars, cafes, and beaches in and around Tallinn. This form of memory-making and archiving stands in contrast to the performative nature of the public reading of American artist Zoe Leonard's 1992 spoken-word piece *I Want a President...*, organised by Berlin-based artists Malin Arnell and Kajsa Dahlberg in collaboration with Stockholm-based Johanna Gustavsson and Fia-Stina Sandlund and Leonard herself. The performance was held at the base of the nationalist Independence War Victory Column on 10 June, and the text was adapted for the local context. Co-curator Airi Triisberg notes that the purpose of the performance was as a response to some of the debates being held by local LGBT activists in terms of holding a pride march. In particular, they were responding to the problematic arguments being made including a rejection “demonstration culture” and protest as antithetical to “Estonian traditions” to the much more problematic “[fears] transsexuals defining the public image of ‘completely normal’ people, such as the majority of gays and lesbians” (Kivimaa 2012b, 216). The performative nature of this protest is characterised by both an occupation of public space in the city as well as a clear rebuke to the normalising aspects of assimilationist lesbian and gay politics.

The curators were also intent on interrogating the extent to which feminist and queer curatorial practices could intersect within an institutional setting. For example, Triisberg describes how some of the overriding concerns behind the exhibition include questions of how these forms of curating could be expressed as “a very specific kind of method, a strategy of doing

exhibitions differently,” particularly in the practical aspects of staging an exhibition (Kivimaa 2012b, 220). Rebeka Põldsam reflects some of these critical anxieties, pointing to the small number of cultural workers who engage in these types of curatorial practices “despite the prominence of some of these exhibitions” as well as the insular nature of those workers and academics who are engaged in the field (Kivimaa 2012b, 221). Furthermore, the question of continued institutional support continues to be a central issue for the long-term prospects of LGBTQ (and feminist) art exhibitions within state institutions in the Baltic States. In the wake of *Untold Stories*, the new head of the Tallinn Art Hall referred to the exhibition as an example of “niche” exhibitions that should be pushed to the margins of the institution's programming (Kivimaa 2012b, 207). If such exhibitions are contingent on support from within art galleries and museums, a change in mandate, staff, or direction of the institution has the potential to end overt support for such work.

I also want to point to a larger academic debate that exists in terms of the impact of the designation of EU Capital of Culture. Ostensibly the hosting duties are meant to introduce cities to an EU-wide audience, and in particular, to showcase local cultural production and heritage. Along with this is a strong pressure to conform to the bureaucratic requirements that accompany EU funding and the hosting duties. Finnish art historian and cultural researcher Tuuli Lähdesmäki critiques this dynamic, observing that the designation: “narrows the cultural richness in Europe by ignoring the already existing local and grass-root level cultural phenomena, and by demanding development that follows current regeneration and development trends.” She further comments on the goals of the programme, stating that “it simultaneously homogenises the cultural offerings due to the structure which forces the cities to follow certain criteria, obey certain cultural values and trends, and compete against other cities for the designation” (Lähdesmäki 2014, 493–494). Tentatively

extending this critique further to *Untold Stories*, one could question whether EU support, as well as funding from the city of Tallinn, represented a concerted effort to recognise and encourage the cultural production of LGBT artists in Estonia, or whether it was more a performative act presenting a “progressive” face to the rest of Europe.

### ***Slash: Between the Normative and the Fantasy*** – transnational and local queerness

Held as a part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride/EuroPride 2015, *Slash: Between the Normative and the Fantasy* (*Šķērssvītva: starp normatīvo un fantāziju*, curator Kaspars Vanags) opened at the Kim? Contemporary Art Center in Rīga on 18 June 2015 and closed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August. The venue takes its name from the Latvian phrase “kas ir māksla?” or, “what is art?” Kim? is a contemporary art space with a mandate to engage in a critical discussion of “what it means to be a cultural agent today” while exploring “how to show and talk about art, thinking about how art functions in differing contexts of local and global economies, traditions, cultures and subcultures, between the disappearance and reappearance of identities” (Groševs, n.d.). Here I want to highlight the international focus of the mandate, particular the mandate’s conception of “differing contexts of local and global economies.” In bringing together Latvian and international artists, the centre’s mandate serves to link the local artistic community, which receives little to no press or visibility in the west, to larger artistic networks and contemporary cultural production. *Slash* mirrored such ambitions – to bring together local and international artists in a dialogue about gender, sexuality, and queerness.

The exhibition featured thirteen artists from Latvia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Finland, Poland, and Germany. Similar to *From Dusk till Dawn*, *Slash* also included two parallel exhibitions, one a solo

show of Latvian artist Inga Melgere at the Janis Rozentāls and Rūdolfs Blaumanis Museum and the other featuring the work of American artist Matthew Lutz-Kinoy’s mixed-media piece *Princess PomPom in the Villa of Falling Flowers* at 427 Gallery. Notably, the exhibition was intended to run until 2 August; according to the gallery’s website, it closed abruptly on 1 July when the building owners evicted the gallery from the space (427 Gallery, n.d.). It is unclear whether the eviction was related to the content of the show or to its ties to the larger exhibition.

*Slash* was curated by Latvian curator Kaspars Vanags, best known as a co-founder of the Open Creative Collective in Rīga, as well as the curator of the Latvian pavilion at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2015. A small portion of the exhibition was curated by Gary Everett the founder and artistic director of the Liverpool-based queer arts festival *Homotopia*. Everett, in collaboration with the Tom of Finland Foundation, selected a number of Tom of Finland’s works to be exhibited. The press release for *Slash* described its theoretical premise as “the first time a public art institution in Latvia is turning towards ‘slashes’ among contemporary art expression” (Vanags 2015). This reference to the term “slashes” is tied to a theoretical proposition made by Vanags in his curatorial statement. In a similar manner to Kreivytė’s use of the Lithuanian term *kreivas* as an analogue to queer, Vanags looked to the Latvian word *šķērss*. For Vanags, it represents “something that is opposite to straight, holds considerable potential as an equivalent to *queer*, which in the English-speaking world was introduced in the 1980s, when describing one’s own personal take on the peculiarities of one’s sexuality” (Vanags 2015). Furthermore, the word’s literal translation into English is diagonal or cross – something that cuts across at an angle different from “straight.” The link to queerness is evident throughout the exhibition, pointing to the struggles of the past, to queer possibilities in the present, and the unknown destinations in the future.



The exhibition also makes a similar move to *From Dusk till Dawn* in its reference to the decriminalisation of homosexuality. It states:

More than 20 years had to pass since the decriminalisation of homosexuality for such an exhibition, influenced by the digitalisation of personal life, to be possible – borrowing from the *open-source* mentality. The other, here, isn't juxtaposed to the norm as something locked in the solitude of an individual strangeness or an impossible taboo, but as an awareness of an essentially recognisable, reachable, and modifiable aspect of personal identity. (Vanags 2015.)

The text gestures toward the current technological environment where personal details can easily be shared and engaged with via social media, allowing for the diffusion of identities that were not possible previously. Similarly, the title of the exhibition, *Slash: In Between the Normative and the Fantasy*, is characterised as a space between, rather than hard binary oppositions:

Stuck between the norm and fantasy, the slash questions the self-explanatory about sexual orientation. It questions the difference between identity and belonging, between belonging and decency. It does not concern only homosexuality, but a whole range of issues, which sometimes dart and zigzag through our minds. (Vanags 2015.)

Its argument is one steeped in questions of community and belonging, particularly when social and political space is not always given to those on the margins. Furthermore, “slash” represents not a division between the local and the global, but a liminal space in which the local is disseminated in the global, and where the global is made local through language, culture, and everyday experience. However, the exhibition, much like *From Dusk till Dawn*, relies on a stable origin point – the decriminalisation of homosexuality – to frame its theoretical exploration of art and representation.

In the broader context of the exhibition, I want to make a note of a few things that should be considered when attempting to understand its rhetorical function in the programming of EuroPride. Due to the explicit nature of some of the works included in the exhibition, admission was limited to those 18 years and older, unless accompanied by a guardian. While this could be seen as potentially problematic, in particular by relegating queerness to the realm of banal pornography and provocation – the question of what compromises would have been required to remove this prohibition remains up for debate. As well, the international aspect of the exhibition deserves further exploration – here, the question of how international collaboration and cultural exchange translates into a sense of solidarity and the building of artistic networks is ripe for future study.

Included in the exhibition were works by Latvian artists, including Atis Jākobsons' large-scale figurative illustrations and explicit drawings from the archives of illustrator Edgars Ozoliņš. Berlin-based Canadian artist Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay contributed a performance and textual piece *Love Letters Transcribed*. The piece consisted of letters from his personal correspondence with friends and lovers that were transcribed specifically for the exhibition. They were distributed through various interactive means: letters were sent by mail to exhibition visitors who wrote their contact details in the bathroom of the gallery, while the artist passed other copies out to passers-by who met the artist in an inner-city park in Riga at midnight on the summer solstice, coinciding with the exhibition (Nemerofsky Ramsay, n.d.). *Slash* also featured Polish Karol Radziszewski's nine-channel video installation entitled *Fag Fighters*, which plays on the Polish right-wing perception of homosexuality as a national threat by depicting the escapades of a gang of gay anarchists who are signified by the pink balaclavas they wear. Radziszewski is notable for his work as the editor of *Dik Fagazine*, the only art journal to cover queer art in Central and Eastern Europe, and as the founder of the *Queer Archives*

*Institute*, an artistic and archival project “dedicated to research, collection, digitalisation, presentation, exhibition, analysis and artistic interpretation of queer archives, with special focus on Central and Eastern Europe” (Radziszewski, n.d.).

Baltic Pride 2015 was held alongside EuroPride, representing the first time that a post-Soviet nation had been awarded hosting duties. EuroPride’s mandate suggests that the decision of a host city is normally predicated on a strong local LGBTI community as well as an experienced organising team. However, they also emphasise the “the political significance of the event for the region and host city’s LGBTI friendliness all come into play” (EuroPride, n.d.). EuroPride is as much an initiative for social change as it is about supporting local activists. Rīga was selected as the venue for EuroPride in 2012, when organisers of Baltic Pride 2015 *Mozaika* competed against LGBT groups from Vienna, Manchester, Milan, and Barcelona, for the rights to host. Most notably, Vienna withdrew its bid and threw their support behind *Mozaika*’s bid. In speaking to the US-based LGBT news organisation *The Advocate*, the head of EuroPride, Hans de Meyer, remarked that the homophobic environment in Latvia was not a factor counted against Rīga, but rather was a motivation to award the city hosting duties. More importantly, de Meyer noted the influence of Russia on Baltic politics and local LGBT communities, stating:

We’re not allowed to go into [Russia] without getting arrested for being who we are, so of course [EuroPride is] the next best thing we can do [...] It’s not only Latvia; if you look at what happened last year in Baltic Pride and the difficulties they had organising it in Vilnius, Lithuania, the country next door, it’s the same thing. There’s still this Russian influence that plays a part in the acceptance of LGBT rights. (Godfrey 2015.)

In effect, EuroPride’s decision to go to Latvia was based as much on supporting the local LGBT community as it was in building solidarity with activists across the region, particularly those to the East.

The decision to hold EuroPride in Rīga was met with condemnation from Latvian political and religious leaders. The Vice Mayor of Rīga, Andris Ameriks, when speaking to the news service *The Baltic Times*, described EuroPride as “a pretentious demonstration of oneself, which does not promote understanding” and argued that it shouldn’t be allowed (*The Baltic Times* 2015). Protests occurred during the main pride march, with one of the major protest groups calling themselves *Antiglobalisti*, or anti-globalists. The implication in their name is that gay and lesbian rights, and by extension, gay and lesbian identities, are a result of globalisation and not native to Latvian culture.<sup>13</sup> While local media focused on the negative backlash of EuroPride, less critical attention has been paid to the political and social dimensions of hosting EuroPride or the impact of exhibitions such as *Slash*. In the one academic article that explores the implications of EuroPride for the local community, British academic Jayne Caudwell examines how the language of international human rights is taken up at a local level, and in particular, through an ethnographic exploration of the Baltic Pride/EuroPride 2015 Pride House and the inclusion of foreign VIPs in the festival.

In her observations and interviews with volunteers at Pride House, Caudwell notes that while there was a lack of fluency in international discourses of human rights, “there was evidence of positive discourses of LGBT equality

13 For a more thorough analysis of the tension between local attitudes towards homosexuality and Pride Marches, and its impact on “tolerance” of sexual minorities, see: Dace Dzenovska, *School of Europeanness: Tolerance and Other Lessons in Political Liberalism in Latvia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 112–140.

and a strong shared commitment to the finale Pride parade” (2018, 57). Caudwell contrasted the volunteers with foreign VIPs, who were primarily political figures from foreign embassies located in Rīga and representatives of international human rights NGOs. Caudwell points to the human rights conference held during EuroPride, where local and international speakers discussed the state of LGBT rights in the region as well as the homophobic backlash the pride events faced. However, as she notes, there was a distinct gap between the universal language of human rights being spoken of in broad political and legal terms and the local “vernacularisation of rights [involving] small-scale social interactions and broader cultural associations attached to contemporary political and legal stories, and LGBT forums, art and film” (Caudwell 2018, 60). Extending this analysis to *Slash*, the questions of foreign support and local interpretations of the exhibition remain unanswered. In this respect, the actual use of the “slash” as a way to bring queer into local vernacular remains an unfulfilled theoretical gesture of making queer local. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the use of the term – which is inherently non-sexual – evacuates the radical potential that exists in the English context of queer. This reflects one Polish sociologist Joanna Mizielińska’s key critiques of queer’s potential in non-English contexts: perhaps “translation has the opposite effect to that intended by its users: instead of questioning normative sexuality it may strengthen it by erasing sexuality from the discourse altogether” (2006, 91).

## Conclusion

To conclude, I return to the research questions undergirding my analysis: how did the three exhibitions attempt to link LGBT identity to national history and belonging, and how did they engage with larger theoretical debates in curatorial, feminist, and queer studies in Central and Eastern Europe at the times they were held? While all three engaged with national

history and identity, while reflecting larger debates in queer and feminist studies transnationally, they did so in very different ways. *From Dusk till Dawn* represented a two-fold curatorial strategy: the presentation of historical materials, including news papers clips, TV programs, and other documentation of LGBT life in Lithuania, alongside cultural production engaging in larger discourses of gender and sexuality. The theoretical basis for the exhibition is evidenced in its exhibition catalogue – where a timeline of LGBT history in Lithuania is presented alongside essays that engage in critical discussions of queerness and anti-normativity. *Untold Stories*, on the other hand, exhibited works informed by the oral histories of LGBT Estonians while providing documentary evidence of “the everyday experiences of sexual minorities in social relations” (Härm et al 2011). In contrast to *From Dusk till Dawn*, *Untold Stories* placed individual experience and memory, rather than historical events, up front and centre. While *Untold Stories* bridged both the local and the transnational with the inclusion of international artists, *Slash* took a much more theoretically based approach to questions of gender and sexuality. Through the linkage of the Latvian term *šķērsis* to the English “queer,” the exhibition’s theoretical move was to take queer theoretical propositions, including the socially constructed nature of gender and sexuality, and bring them into a local context. The inclusion of both Latvian and international artists reinforced the curator’s desire to put the local and the transnational in dialogue, rather than in a unidirectional flow of western theory to eastern praxis.

However, the theoretical propositions of all three exhibitions point to a larger problem of making the transnational local. In her discussion of feminist curation in the Baltics in the 1990s, Katrin Kivimaa points out how feminist curators often looked towards contemporary feminist art practices internationally as a way of engaging in and contributing to the internationalisation of contemporary art. As Kivimaa notes, this had an additional effect, one in which local male artists and art critics

were able to successfully counter such theoretical interventions as “political correctness,” using the lack of political feminism and feminist activist groups in the Baltic States as evidence of how these “concerns” originated outside the nation and therefore were not representative of local contemporary (national) art practices (2012a, 75–77).

However, I wish to caution against placing the location of the production of theory and praxis as solely in the west – in particular, the perception that discourse is unidirectional in flow and impact. As seen in the exhibitions discussed herein, research questions are often motivated by local concerns including historical milestones for local communities, testimonies of the generation that lived through the Soviet occupation, as well as attempts to make “queer” local. In discussing queer curatorial strategies in the Polish context, Paweł Leszkowicz notes how

[t]he escape outside this narrow national framework seems to be impossible even for queer artists, curators and historians who want to question the entire system, so pervasive is the official national discourse. On the one hand, queering the national heritage is disruptive for the nationalist ideology which remains heteronormative, on the other a more cosmopolitan approach would only enrich the queer disruption of boundaries. (2018, 84–85.)

For such work to be done there needs to be more than a “first” exhibition addressing national history and cultural identity through LGBT and queer lenses. Rather, these debates need to be actively maintained and opened to new audiences outside of activist and academic circles.

Of the exhibitions held to date in the Baltics, none have been granted access to the main institutions of cultural memory: national museums and galleries. The step of having the ability – and the institutional support – to question the very foundation of national identity is a key step of “queer

memory work.” According to Leszkowicz, exhibitions that *have* been given access to the institutions of national memory have been “very successful in their vision of alternative histories” (2018, 85). However, in my view this reinforces the need to cast a critical eye on the ways that institutions actively engage in and produce national identity and culture – rather than acting as repositories of tradition and heritage.

All three exhibitions examined herein received support from local arts groups, galleries, museums, NGOs, politicians, and international embassies and granting agencies. However, it remains unclear at this point in my research how the process of applying for and receiving grants and other material support had an impact on the final shape these exhibitions took. Similar questions could also be asked of the organisations that chose to fund these exhibitions – what were their motivations for providing funding? Furthermore, it remains unclear to me how the administration and mandates of the respective galleries influenced the critical questions each exhibition proposed. Looking at the exhibitions more specifically, they are quite different in terms of how they were framed – either through national identity or transnational conceptions of queerness. Ripe for further research are the transnational dimensions of queer theory and praxis in curation in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, what dynamics allow curators to engage with western queer theory, both in local academic and cultural settings and through educational exchanges and conferences? And, have these exhibitions marked a concerted shift within institutional practices in their respective countries? Finally, the institutionalisation of national memory reifies the nation as one of the primary pre-occupations of any institutional critique. If one were to go beyond the frame of the nation, and in particular, tap into transnational dynamics of sexuality and gender, what would this mean for local LGBT communities who might no longer see themselves, their experiences and histories, as the material for local artists and curators? And how would this gesture towards a form



of “queerness” that becomes essentialised as a universal form of “non-normativity” rather than particularised through local interpretations, curatorial and academic writing, and activist engagements?

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## Appendix 1: Other LGBT Exhibitions in the Baltic States

Note: This is not an exhaustive list and as such should be considered as in progress. For brevity, this list does not include exhibitions that are not LGBT or queer in focus, but include LGBT artists or artworks.

EXHIBITION NAME	DATES	LOCATION	NOTES
<i>Amour – Vahet Pole</i>	2008	Lounge Stereo, Tallinn, Estonia	Charity exhibition and solo exhibition of Estonian photographer Indrek Galetin, raising funds for the Estonian AIDS Prevention Centre
<i>Karminas (Carmine)</i>	2008	Tulips and Roses Gallery, Vilnius, Lithuania	Exhibition of Lithuanian painters Adomas Danusevičius and Alina Melnikova
<i>For Human Rights with No Censorship</i>	10 – 19 December 2009	Gallery Kairė-dešinė, Vilnius, Lithuania	Curated by Laima Kreivytė
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	6 – 9 May 2010	Hotel Conti, Vilnius, Lithuania	Organized by Swedish MEP Christofer Fjellner; part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride 2010
<i>Perekond (Family)</i>	6 – 12 June 2011	März Projektiruum, Tallinn, Estonia	Curated by artists Anna-Stina Treumund and Jaanus Samma; part of the cultural programming of OMA Festival/Baltic Pride 2011
<i>Orlando. A Biography</i>	2012	Gallery Kairė-dešinė, Vilnius, Lithuania	Solo exhibition of Lithuanian artist Laisvydė Šalčiūtė
<i>By the Way</i>	21 – 31 August 2014	Skalvijos kino teatras, Vilnius, Lithuania	Solo exhibition of Lithuanian photographer Arcana Femina; part of the programming for Kreivės Vilnius Queer Festival
<i>Kõhe tunne?! (Feeling Queezy?!)</i>	2 August – 7 September 2014	EKKM, Tallinn, Estonia	Curated by Rebeka Põldsam
<i>LGBTI Latvijā no 20. Gadsima sākuma (LGBTI in Latvia Since the Beginning of the 20th Century)</i>	15 – 21 June 2015	Kaņepes Kultūras Centrs, Rīga, Latvia	Historical exhibition, curated by historians Ineta Lipša <sup>1</sup> and Inese Runce
<i>Vision of Kaos</i>	20 – 30 August 2015	Skalvijos kino teatras, Vilnius, Lithuania	Solo exhibition of Lithuanian photographer Arcana Femina; part of the programming for Kreivės Vilnius Queer Festival

<i>Not Suitable For Work: A Chairman's Tale<sup>2</sup></i>	9 May – 22 November 2015 15 April – 9 October 2016	Estonian Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy; Museum of Occupations, Tallinn, Estonia	Solo exhibition of Estonian artist Jaanus Samma
<i>5 Years of Struggle</i>	13 – 23 June 2016	Paviljonas, Vilnius, Lithuania	Solo exhibition of Russian photographer Romas Melnik; part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride 2016
<i>M-i märg unenägu (M's Wet Dream)</i>	9 December 2016 – 26 February 2017	Tartu kunstimuuseum, Tartu, Estonia	Solo exhibition of Estonian photographer Anna-Stina Treumund
<i>Lietuva atskleidžia (Lithuania reveals)</i>	9 – 26 May 2017	Seimas (Parliament), Vilnius, Lithuania	Solo exhibition of Lithuanian photographer Arcana Femina; held in conjunction with the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia
<i>Who is this Wo/Man</i>	6 – 9 July 2017	Kino Artis, Tallinn, Estonia	Solo exhibition of Belgian photographer Danny Eeraerts; part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride 2017
<i>Humans of Rainbow</i>	4 – 10 June 2018	Kultūras Centrs Sudrabs, Riga, Latvia	Part of the cultural programming of Baltic Pride 2018
<i>Piiritlemata Perfektsus (Undefined Perfection)</i>	8 February – 31 March 2019	Fotomuuseum, Tallinn, Estonia	Solo exhibition of Estonian photographer Indrek Galetin
<i>Lilli, Reed, Frieda, Sabine, Eha, Malle, Alfred, Rein and Mari</i>	20 June – 15 September 2019	Fotografiska, Tallinn, Estonia	Solo exhibition of Estonian photographer Anna-Stina Treumund
<i>The Darkroom: Tom of Finland</i>	21 February – 19 July 2020	Fotografiska, Tallinn, Estonia	First exhibition of the photographic works of illustrator Touko Laaksonen (Tom of Finland)

<sup>1</sup> Lipša's larger research has included an analysis of family formations, women's rights, and abortion during the initial period of independence of Latvia from 1918–1940. See: Ineta Lipša, *Seksualitāte Un Sociālā Kontrole Latvijā 1914–1939* (Riga: Zinātne Apgads, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Finnish academic Riikka Taavetti discusses Samma's work at length, in particular the controversial nature of its presentation at the Museum of Occupations in Tallinn. See: Riikka Taavetti, "Queer Politics of Memory: Undisciplined Sexualities as Glimpses and Fragments in Finnish and Estonian Pasts," PhD diss. (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2018).