'Frends is olvais velcome to Lithuania': The Location of Contemporary Lithuanian Art

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Taking the work of the contemporary Lithuanian artist collective Academic Training Group as a case study, this article charts the way in which the place of Lithuanian art has been negotiated through international art exhibitions using various geographical frames. What does the subsumption of Lithuanian art into narratives of Eastern European, Nordic, Baltic or national art histories affirm or deny? Following the recent writings of Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, I argue for the need to write a new critical form of national art history; one that, although 'provincial', takes into account the impact of a complex vector of spatial and political interactions that has itself been one of the critical strengths of contemporary Lithuanian art production.

In her study *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*, Irit Rogoff writes that with 'the conjunction of emergent rhetorics of deterritorialized subjects with the theorization of deterritorialized epistemologies' it is time to reconsider the seemingly disappearing role of the fixed epistemic category of geography, particularly regarding its relation to shifts in identity formation.[1] In this article, I aim to evaluate the geographical rewriting of national art histories in relation to the specific case of contemporary Lithuanian art and its exhibition. I chart the varying meanings and critical successes of a particular work, *Welcome* (1997), by the Lithuanian artist collective Academic Training Group, as it has been identified with different geopolitical constructions through its inclusion in a series of geographically themed exhibitions. My model relies on new work by geography-oriented art historians who claim that the original understanding of *Kunstgeographie*, which defines artworks according to national styles and according to a form of connoisseurship, may not be productive for contemporary art history. Nonetheless, they claim it remains necessary to situate artworks geopolitically in order to adequately account for artistic practices in 'marginal' locations. For example, the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski argues that this is especially needed in the

1 I. Rogoff, Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture. London, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 1–2.

case of Central and Eastern European art history, where new borders, walls and spatial shapes are being navigated both practically and ideologically. Taking the exhibition format as a type of art-historical production, my ultimate aim in this article is to consider possible geographical and political framings of Lithuanian art that could take account of its complex and critical meanings in an international context.

After the Wall and the geopolitical construction of post-communist European art

At the opening of the mega-exhibition *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* in Moderna Museet, Stockholm in October 1999, visitors encountered not one, but two welcome mats. The first was a performance work by Armenian artist Azat Sargsyan. Wearing a tunic on which the word 'WELCOME' was stencilled in white paint, Sargsyan laid himself at the museum entrance, forcing visitors to step over his body to enter the exhibition. Although the Berlin Wall, which served as the geographical and historical frame of the exhibition, was no longer in existence at the time of his work, Sargsyan's performance, entitled *Welcome to the Wall*, drew attention to the persistent effect of such a delimiting boundary, most notably the personal impact of the Soviet regime which turned human bodies into enforced and enforcing objects of barricade.

The second welcome mat was of a much more traditional variety (fig. 1). Produced in 1997 by Giedrius Kumetaitis and Mindaugas Ratavičius, two members of the Lithuanian artist collective Academic Training Group, *Welcome* consisted of a blue rug that also lay upon the gallery floor. Academic Training Group (or ATG; *Akademinio pasiruošimo grupė* in Lithuanian) was formed at the beginning of Lithuanian independence in 1992, and their works generally take a critical approach to the varieties of everyday life in post-Soviet Lithuania, particularly in relation to inflated ideas of self-representation and the often suspect production of national identity. Rather than whole-heartedly celebrating the end of Soviet socialism and the birth of national independence in Lithuania, their previous multimedia works have dealt with the impact of transition in terms of its nefarious effects on the individual. This is most clearly represented by an early work from 1993, *Vilnius Service* (*Vilniaus servisas* in Lithuanian), in which the artists provide video documentation of the best buildings in Vilnius from which to jump and commit suicide. ATG's *Welcome* mat belongs among the seminal works of this group as well as of Lithuanian art in the late 1990s. Its woven pink border outlines the statement 'Frends is olvais velcome to Lithuania', the folksy, broken English invitation is matched by its soft texture, which seems to beckon visitors into the museum both literally and physically, inviting them to make themselves at home in the space as guests of Lithuania. The hospitable theme was further emphasised by the image chosen to represent the work in the exhibition catalogue: the carpet is shown alongside a pair of discarded shoes, with a person's bare feet visible frolicking in the background.

After the Wall, scheduled to mark the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, was described at the time by one of its curators, David Elliott, as the largest project

undertaken by the Moderna Museet. It included one hundred and forty-four artists from twenty-one-and-a-half countries (East Germany being the half) representing the entire former Eastern bloc. In the exhibition essay, co-curator Bojana Pejić took a critical stance against what she perceived as the trend for marginalisation and 'ethnicisation' of non-Western artworks through museum exhibitions and interpretations focused on cultural and national origin.[2] In order to avoid that trap, selections for *After the Wall* were based on an assessment of aesthetic innovation falling under the four conceptual categories which determined the exhibition's physical and thematic layout: social sculpture (a term borrowed from Joseph Beuys); history; personal and artistic subjectivity; and gender. Each work was exhibited without any identifying information (information about the artist, including year of birth and country of residence, could be gleaned from the exhibition brochure). In addition to the lack of contextual information, the exhibition placed each work within its own 'white cube', following a modernist convention that limits the interaction between art and architecture and gives the illusion of the work's aesthetic autonomy. An extensive two-volume catalogue was also produced. This included the original texts dealing with the main themes of the exhibition, an anthology of previously published texts representing various national standpoints, a chronology of artistic and political events of importance for the represented countries, and an alphabetical compendium of the artists and their works.

As one of the first – and until now one of the most comprehensive – exhibitions dedicated to a critical examination of 'post-communist Europe', *After the Wall* has continued to receive much critical attention. While some have celebrated the labyrinthine effect of the exhibition caused by the sheer number of rooms needed to display the artworks as an appropriate spatial representation of the complex of art practices in the region, others have criticised its breadth and curatorial ambition as a confusing jumble.[3] Disdain for the mega-exhibition format has become a constant in the critique of museum practices, but in the context of the display and exhibition of works known as Central-Eastern European or post-communist art, these critiques still bear some weight, especially in terms of notions of artistic and cultural identity. In this vein, the most common criticism of *After the Wall* concerned the way in which the exhibition wrote a history of post-communist countries and their arts that proposes a homogeneous political and, more importantly, cultural bloc. Cold War insularity, or even a form of Eastern European 'othering', was said to be reinforced through the exhibition's inclusion of vastly different formal, regional, and cultural practices under the same historiographic umbrella of 'post-communist art and culture'.[4]

The breadth of the selected works was not the only problematic aspect of the exhibition concept. As Elena Filipovic has described in her essay 'The Global White Cube',

2 B. Pejić, The Dialectics of Normality. – After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe. Ex. cat. Vol. I. Eds. B. Pejić, D. Elliott. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999, p. 19.
3 For a positive review, see J. P. Nilsson, After the Wall (Exhibition). – Parachute: Revue d'art contemporaine / Contemporary Art Magazine 2000, no. 98, p. 66. For a more critical example, see I. Sandomirskaja, The Wall After the Wall. – ARTMargins 2000, October, http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=437 (accessed 8 April 2010).
4 See, for example, I. Blom, After the Wall. – Frieze 2000, no. 50, p. 101.

international mega-exhibitions offer, at their best, a platform for bringing together diverse (geographically and conceptually) artistic practices that may serve to address contemporary political issues that are often eschewed by more traditional museums and exhibitions. Nonetheless, such exhibitions do literally frame the artworks through the modernist white cube space, and in a way that has been much criticised for its ideological subjugation of artworks to a (Western and modernist) universalising discourse.[5] This was also the case with *After the Wall*, which was marked (according to the curator herself) by an abundance of physical walls within the space of the show.[6] Using the format of the neutral white cube to frame each of the works may have been an institutional attempt to make the artworks, which have otherwise been excluded from the canon of Western art history, legible to an international audience. It was certainly the aim of the curators to draw attention to individual artistic attitudes rather than illustrate the local context or re-instate Eastern European 'otherness'.[7]

By emphasising universal modernist concepts such as individual artistic traits in an attempt to avoid reducing the artworks to their local contexts, however, the exhibition may have done a disservice to artists such as Sargsyan by eliminating specific geopolitical details of the works through the neutral exhibition strategy and lack of identifying information. Artist and critic Ronald Jones referred to many of the works as 'stay-at-home timid by Western standards', especially in terms of formal innovation. Referring to Sargsyan's *Welcome to the Wall* performance at the opening of the exhibition, Jones wrote: 'He is successful at playing the role of the artist-dissident à la Joseph Beuys or Chris Burden (which we recognize by Sargsyan's use of civil disobedience) – but, again, to what purpose? [---] He is out of context by ten years, a dissident without a cause, ultimately suspended in the endless 'actions' of the pseudo-radical who disrupts, but with nothing gained. In the end, it would be natural to mistake him for what he is: a nuisance. At best he is a 'provisional' militant in search of an ideology.'[8]

If Jones had considered Sargsyan's performance in relation to his heritage as an Armenian artist trained in Soviet Moscow rather than within a static Western tradition of aesthetic innovation in the medium of performance art, the artist's seemingly passive 'dissidence without a cause' may have been more fairly read as a critical interpretation of the impact of the Soviet political regime on the human subject and artistic practice. It may have also been read more favourably as a critical reinterpretation of performance practices in the particular geopolitical situation.

Co-curator Pejić's strategy for *After the Wall* was to use the shared temporal and political status of post-communism to frame the artists and the artworks displayed, rather than to focus on a shared 'place' of post-communist art and as she writes: '…one cannot exhibit context. [---] What we can do is exhibit works of art. Works of art cannot illustrate the Eastern, Post-Communist 'context.''[9] Claiming that the works of

5 E. Filipovic, The Global White Cube. – The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe. Eds. B. Vanderlinden, E. Filipovic. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, p. 65.
6 B. Pejić, The Dialectics of Normality, p. 27.
7 B. Pejic, East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe: 'What Comes After the Wall?' – ARTMargins 2003, March, http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=254 (accessed 8 April 2010).
8 R. Jones, After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe. – Artforum International 2000, March, p. 126.
9 B. Peijc, East of Art.

art go beyond the local context, it seems that the curators did not intend the artworks or artists to illustrate and elaborate geopolitical conditions, yet the geopolitical impulse was not entirely absent from the curatorialisation of *After the Wall*. On one of the first pages of the exhibition catalogue, the reader will find what Pejić describes as a 'schematic drawing showing the relative positions of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe'.[10] The diagram resembles a gallery floor plan, with each participating country represented by a room-like shape and the geographically distant Russian Federation countries existing either on the second floor or in a separate pavilion of the imagined post-communist museum. While the plan cleverly maps the region in a way that makes it intelligible within this aesthetic institutional framework, it follows the traditional cartography of the Western museum, in which schools of style and nation are grouped together spatially in separate rooms.[11] The same form of categorisation, utilising the nation as its defining unit, continues in the catalogue, which contains entries on each country in encyclopaedic style. In the introductory text of the catalogue the curators themselves state that *After the Wall* served as both the first instance in which post-communist art and culture could be 'mapped' according to separate nations, and the final moment that one could conceptualise post-communist Europe as a unified region, before its impending European integration.[12]

The place of Lithuanian art in post-communist geographies

Although the structure of the exhibition emphasised the transparency of the works of art, it may not only have been the decontextualisation of Sargsyan's piece that led to its critical panning as 'old hat'. Rather, the work's own functioning in relation to its context was left obscure. As Boris Groys has argued, it is the duty of 'Eastern European artists, curators and art critics: to reflect upon the specific context of contemporary art in Eastern Europe through its own art. Those who refuse to contextualise themselves will be implanted into a context by someone else....'[13] Through this critical lens, we might say that the second welcome mat, *Welcome* by Lithuanian artists Kumetaitis and Ratavičius, was much more successful.[14] *Welcome* managed to strategically foreground its locality and, as a result, it could not be so easily disregarded by critics merely on the basis of an apparent lack of aesthetic innovation. By welcoming 'frends' to Lithuania, the mat succeeded in turning the white cube, a partitioned museum space, into an imaginary nation-state.

The medium of the work, weaving or carpet-making, almost renders the mat an object of folk art, yet it is placed in the context of an international contemporary art exhibition. The misspelling of the English phrase emulates a Lithuanian pronunciation, further extending the work's folksy character. However, the phrase may take on a double meaning. The English word 'welcome' often pronounced by Lithuanians as

10 Image caption in: After the Wall, p. 13.
11 T. D. Kaufmann, Toward a Geography of Art. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 100.
12 D. Elliott, Introduction. – After the Wall, p. 11.
13 B. Groys, Back from the Future. – Third Text 2003, vol. 17 (4), p. 331.
14 *Welcome* was mentioned positively in nearly all English-language reviews of the exhibition.

'welcome', is phonetically similar to the Lithuanian word 'vilkome', which translates as 'we drag'. The implication of crossing the threshold of the welcome mat is not a form of hospitality then, but rather a coerced, possibly violent act enacted on the part of the host. The idea of the welcome mat is no longer an invitation, but instead connotes forced inclusion. While this meaning may have been lost on non-Lithuanian speakers, and may serve to localise the work beyond the point of recognition or relevance, it also creates an inside joke within the gallery space. The work's form and content each humorously exaggerate a generalised idea of Lithuania's art-historical and linguistic specificity, while simultaneously expressing the awkwardness of the country's transition into an integrated Europe with all its cultural trappings. Although situated as a Lithuanian artistic product, the result is more closely concerned with the dynamic between local and international, and with attempts on the part of a marginal culture to adapt to the so-called global norm or what Pejić has called the paradoxical condition of 'the dialectics of normality'.[15] Local charm is not merely represented; it is represented strategically in a manner that invites amusement while also making it legible to an international audience. By offering dual perspectives from which to view it, the work affords both a specific and an international meaning, and different interpretations of the work enable it to function critically in both local and global contexts.

The exhibition also included a work by all three members of the Academic Training Group (Giedrius Kumetaitis, Mindaugas Ratavičius and Simonas Tarvydas), *Caught in Lithuania* (1997/1998), comprising eighty slides that illustrate the group's more context-sensitive approach to the complexes of national identity. The piece begins with an image of a lone figure, and as the series of slides progresses the screen gradually fills with what have been described as Central Asian immigrants (figs. 2, 3). As the group of people grows, slide by slide, the framing becomes tighter, eliminating the sensation of space in the image and intimating a feeling of claustrophobia. The slideshow ends with an unruly looking mob: the initial lone figure points a gun at the viewer, and the adolescent standing next to him has formed his hand into a menacing fist. The artists claimed that the piece was intended to refer to sensationalist reports in the Lithuanian media about the dangers of immigration, particularly illegal immigration, following the opening of the country's borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[16]

The work appears to take literally the fears propagated by the mass media by representing a purported worst-case scenario: outsiders walk into the frame, completely overwhelm the space, and become violent. Furthermore, these outsiders appear to be wearing traditional Lithuanian dress, thus seemingly hijacking Lithuanian culture and 'corrupting' the coherence of its national identity. According to Rita Žukauskienė, the number of illegal immigrants in Lithuania is quite low, and the overall rate of migration is actually negative – illegal migrants caught within the country's borders have usually been attempting to cross into Western Europe *through* Lithuania.[17] Against this background, both *Caught in Lithuania* and *Welcome* appear to interpret the specifically

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15 B. Pejić, The Dialectics of Normality, p. 17.
16 Academic Training Group, Statement. – Siksi: The Nordic Art Review 1998, vol. 13 (4), p. 44.
17 R. Zukauskiene, Lithuania. – European Immigration: A Sourcebook. Eds. A. Triandafyllidou, R. Gropas. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, p. 211.
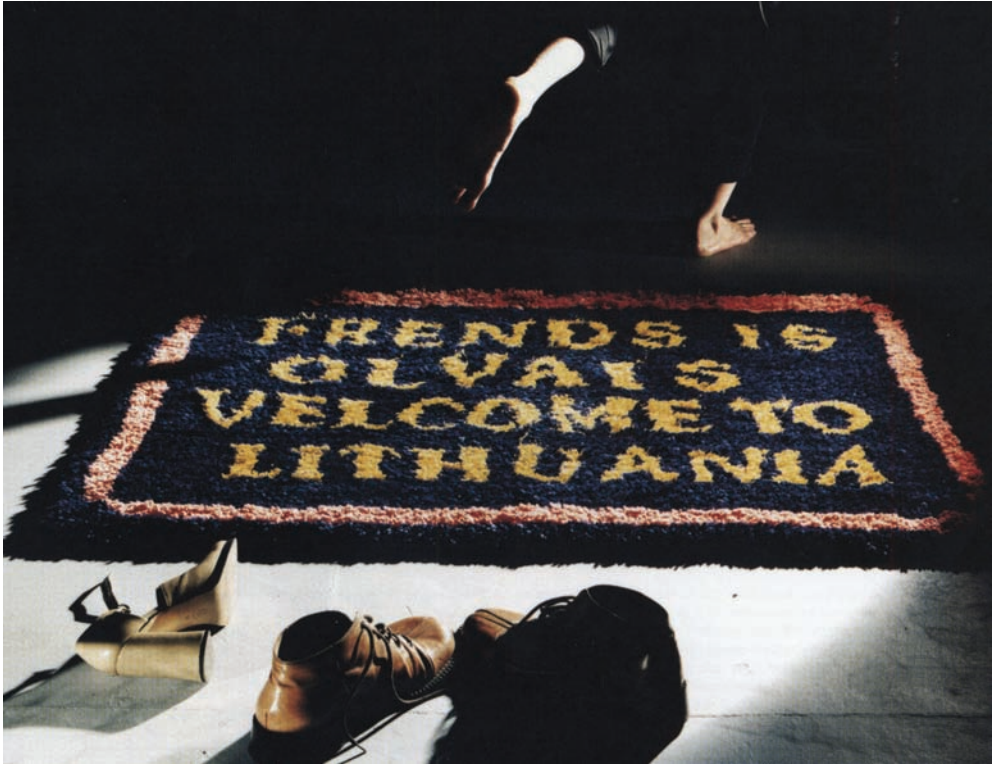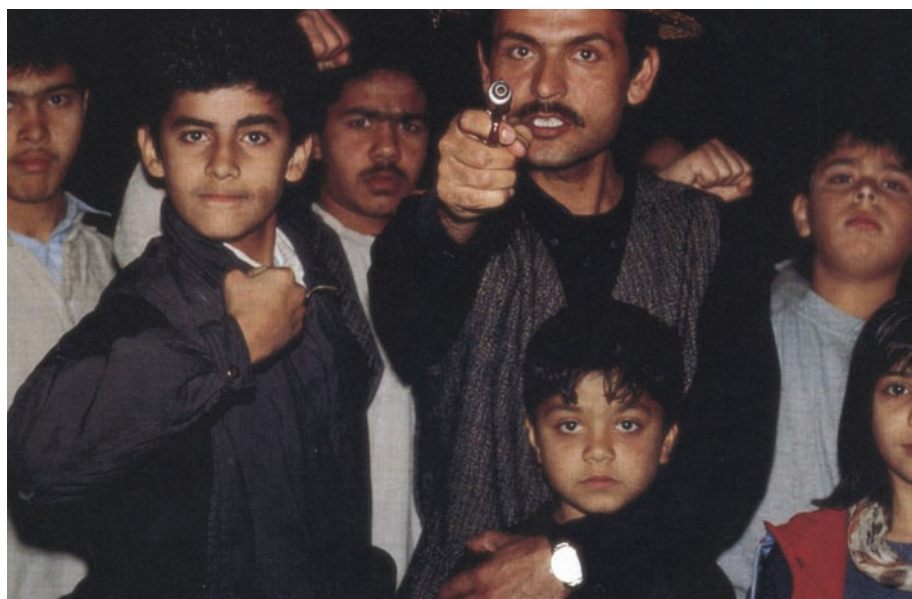
1.
Giedrius Kumetaitis and Mindaugas Ratavičius, *Welcome* (1997).
Photo: Mindaugas Ratavičius. Courtesy of Contemporary Art Information Centre, National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.

2. Academic Training Group, *Caught in Lithuania* (1998). Slide projection.
Photo: courtesy of Contemporary Art Information Centre, National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.

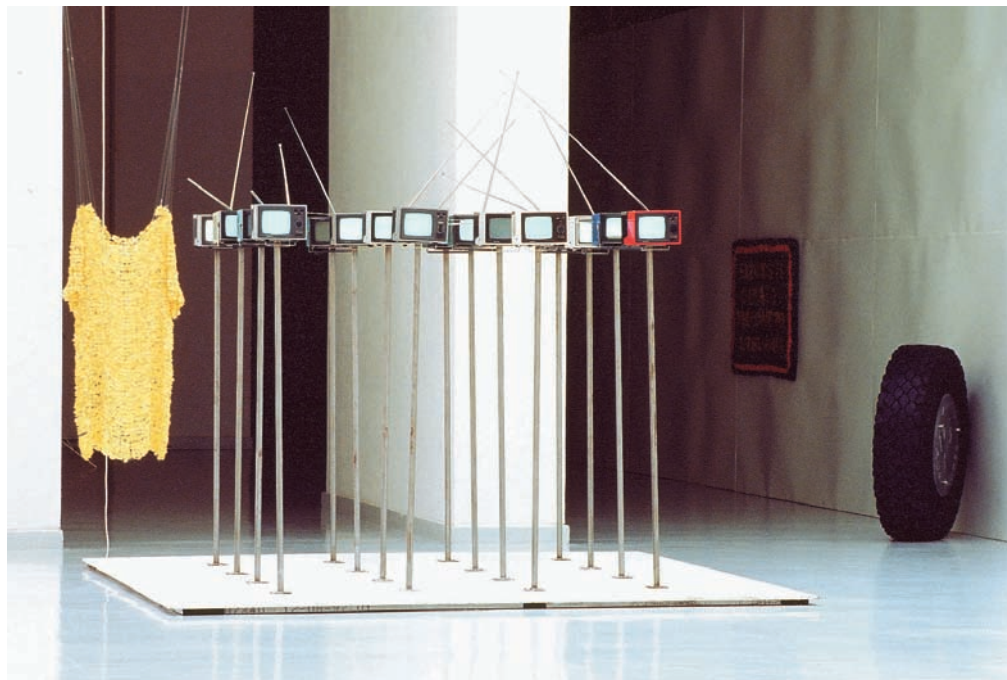

3. Academic Training Group, *Caught in Lithuania* (1998). Slide projection.
Photo: courtesy of Contemporary Art Information Centre, National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.

4.

Academic Training Group, *Welcome* (1997). Exhibition photograph of *Funny versus Bizarre*.
Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania, 1997.
Photo: courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius.

5.

Exhibition view of *Lithuanian Art 1989–1999: The Ten Years*. Works by Eglė Rakauskaitė, Augustinas Beinaravičius, Academic Training Group, Dainius Liškevičius. Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, 1999.
Photo: courtesy of Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius.

6.

Exhibition view of *Villa Lituania* Pavillion, Lithuanian entry to the Venice Biennale in 2007, by Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas.
Photo: courtesy of Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas.

national context of Lithuanian identity, of its population and cultural products, as a form of misidentification. A welcome mat in misspelt English stands for an international greeting; and national culture, its products, and its spaces are now open to the outside. But what are the social implications of entering into globalisation for a country that was a Soviet Socialist Republic until 1991?

Beyond national borders: regional associations

While ATG's works rely on the specificity of Lithuania and Lithuanian-ness, they also deal with issues of locality, identity, and the politics of a nation-state in transition in a way that extends the specific situation of Lithuania. *Caught in Lithuania* was referred to by many critical reviews, partly because the ways in which it dealt with questions of immigration, identity, and security are not unique to Lithuania. In a review in *Art in America*, the critic Susan Snodgrass writes that *After the Wall* was 'assembled amid the political conflicts occasioned by, for example, the deteriorating socio-economic position of women throughout the region, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the horror of ethnic cleansing. Some of these matters are touched upon in the exhibition, although rather subtly. One of the more forceful examples is the installation *Caught in Lithuania* (1998), by the Lithuanian collaborative Academic Training Group.'[18]

Snodgrass's misidentification of the Baltics with the Balkans was helped along by the exhibition catalogue: an image from *Caught in Lithuania* is featured alongside the catalogue text 'The Dialectics of Normality' by Bojana Pejić, immediately next to a paragraph dealing with a description of Kosovo by Tony Blair. In some ways, this interpretation might indicate how an internationally imagined concept of post-communist Europe, while based on misidentification, still functions to lend visibility to artworks from lesser-known countries in the region, which was one of the aims and strengths of *After the Wall*. However, the creation of a history of Central-Eastern European art, a geographic construction of which art exhibitions are part, might be, according to Piotr Piotrowski, 'not only a certain type of consent to the imperialism of the Western idiom, but also driving aspiration to write our culture into the universal history' in order to 'compensate for traumatic historic experiences' (he calls Eastern Europe 'an ahistoric construction').[19] Piotrowski continues: 'it is impossible to deny the fact that East-Central Europe has functioned as a type of a periphery for Western Europe. One must, however, transform such position into an analytic advantage, a tool that will allow us to reveal the meaning and the dynamic of a place in its entire, complex identity.'[20]

While the Academic Training Group's works have been reviewed internationally in the critical responses to *After the Wall*, their practice has also proven adaptable to many regional imaginations, albeit with varying degrees of success. In 1997, *Welcome*

18 S. Snodgrass, Post-Communist Expressions. – Art in America 2000, vol. 88 (6), June, p. 47.
19 P. Piotrowski, In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989. London: Reaktion Books, 2009, pp. 28–29. For a historical examination of the invention of Central-Eastern Europe as the West's 'Other', see L. Wolff, Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
20 P. Piotrowski, In the Shadow of Yalta, p. 29.

was exhibited as a doormat at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania, and also later at the Arsenals in Riga, Latvia, in an exhibition entitled *Funny versus Bizarre*, curated by Lithuanian Kęstutis Kuizinas (fig. 4). The Vilnius exhibition included fifty works by artists from the Nordic and Baltic regions. The geographic frame, the Baltic Sea countries and their character, determined the theme of the show: it sought to challenge stereotypes of northerners as being humourless, cold and gloomy. *Welcome* was one of the first works encountered in the exhibition and, in this case, it served literally to welcome to Lithuania many of the exhibition's foreign works. But the shaggy woollen carpet could not escape its position at the top of the stairs to the Contemporary Art Centre, and could not participate in the financial and popular success of Scandinavian art (and economy) known as the 1990s Nordic miracle.[21] Whereas the Nordic artists included in *Funny versus Bizarre* garnered critical interest throughout Europe, it was more difficult for Baltic artists to participate in the financial and international success of a specifically Nordic association.[22]

A more specific conception of the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) has precipitated several international exhibitions. In 2001–2002, Academic Training Group was included in the exhibition *The Baltic Times* that took place in Ljubljana, and in a slightly modified version in Innsbruck, and was curated by Tihomir Milovac and Branka Stipančić from Zagreb. Named after the English-language newspaper that serves the three countries, the aim of the exhibition was to create 'a platform of sorts, a meeting point for a group of artists, curators and critics who share similar professional and private experiences'.[23] Instead of geographical proximity or a shared historical moment, the exhibition took the cultural landscape as its theme – a cultural landscape that included a shared coast, a shared history as Soviet Socialist Republics, a shared mass media, and a shared network of individuals and relations. With reference to the Academic Training Group, the catalogue text spoke of the rise of nationalism in Lithuania as a means of achieving independence from the Soviet Union, and the contemporary problems this has caused, along with a discussion of recent issues involving human rights in the country[24] – specific political issues not addressed in critical reflections of the work when it was exhibited under the post-communist umbrella.

In 1999, the same year when *After the Wall* was opened, the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius attempted to write a national history of recent Lithuanian art by mounting a retrospective exhibition of recent Lithuanian art practices, *Lietuvos dailė 1989–1999: dešimt metų / Lithuanian Art 1989–1999: The Ten Years*. The exhibition sought to demon-

21 For a critical analysis of this regional art-historical (and art market) trend, see P. Ekroth, Pissing on the Nordic Miracle. – Lights on: Norwegian Contemporary Art. Ex. cat. Eds. G. B. Kvaran, H. B. Ueland, G. Årbu. Milan: Skira, 2008, pp. 91–96.
22 L. Jablonskienė, Dešimtmečio fragmentai [Fragments of the decade]. – Lietuvos dailė 1989–1999: dešimt metų / Lithuanian Art, 1989–1999: The Ten Years. Ex. cat. Ed. K. Kuizinas. Vilnius: Contemporary Art Centre, 1999, p. 18. This is not to say that Lithuanian or other Baltic artists in these types of shows from the late 1990s have not had international success. They have achieved success, but with thematic associations other than the Nordic miracle.
23 T. Milovac, B. Stipančić, The Baltic Times. – The Baltic Times. Suvremena umjetnost Estonije, Latvije i Litve / Contemporary Art from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Eds. T. Milovac, B. Stipančić. Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p. 12.
24 J. Valatkevičius, Academic Training Group (ATG). Giedrius Kumetaitis / Mindaugas Ratavičius / Simonas Tarvydas. – The Baltic Times, p. 54.

strate a 'process of dynamic change rather than just successful artists'.[25] Its mandate was also very clear: it represented only locally practicing artists, rather than émigré artists who had found success internationally. What is remarkable about *Welcome* in this context is that it was not displayed on the floor, but on the wall (fig. 5). Eschewing its force as an installation work, the curators had instead posited the work as a radical reinterpretation of the painterly tradition in Lithuania. This was a useful way of historicising the Academic Training Group, whose roots lie in an ironic response to the traditions of the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 1992, and whose artistic techniques play with the traditional display of art in museums and other cultural institutions.[26] In reviews of *After the Wall*, the formal techniques involved in the works by ATG (in particular, the use of the projected slide show that refers to traditional teaching of art history in universities) were ignored in favour of their cultural contexts. However, when interpreted in Lithuanian context, ATG's practice demonstrates an avant-garde attitude against the background of a more conservative national artistic tradition.

Rewriting locality through artistic practice

ATG's work can also be read as a kind of critical elaboration of the writing of the history of Lithuanian art, a process that has deep connections with nationalist tropes. In her history of Lithuanian art from the 1940s to the present, Raminta Jurėnaitė has argued that during the Soviet occupation the trope of Motherland was the principal myth of many artistic productions. It is also a theme with which contemporary artists have had to contend.[27] As Artūras Tereškinas has shown in relation to contemporary Lithuanian existence, a celebration of specifically national 'character', espoused by a particular form of morality, was instrumental for the independence movement during the late 1980s.[28] However, the contemporary period is marked by apathy to the national mythologies that once signalled a form of protest. Still, national questions are not absent from daily Lithuanian existence, and may contribute to a critical reconfiguration of local community. Tereškinas regards the workings of the mass media as one form of this operation, 'parodizing the myth of national homogeneity, making national belongings inclusive rather than exclusive and transcending linguistic and cultural differences ... restructuring Lithuanians' sense of community and collective identity'.[29] The same may be said about the practices of the Academic Training Group, whose exploration of the contradictions of national identity negotiates the multifaceted location of this form of construction.

25 K. Kuizinas, Lietuvos dailė 1989–1999. Klausimai ir atsakymai [Lithuanian art 1989–1999: questions and answers]. – Lietuvos dailė 1989–1999, p. 11.
26 R. Andriušytė, Dailės grupuotės – organizacinio meno gyvenimo naujovė [Art groups – the novelty of the organisational art life]. – Lietuvos dailės kaita 1990–1996: institucinis aspektas [Changes in Lithuanian art 1990–1996: institutional aspect]. Vilnius: AICA Lietuvos sekcija, 1997, p. 55.
27 R. Jurėnaitė, Between Compromise and Innovation. – Personal Time: Art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, 1945–1996. Lithuania. Ex. cat. Eds. A. Rottenberg et al. Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1996, pp. 16–23.
28 A. Tereškinas, Discovery of the Everyday: Being Lithuanian in the Post-Communist World. – Changing Society: Lithuania. Ex. cat. Eds. L. Jablonskienė, N. Schafhausen. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002, p. 98.
29 A. Tereškinas, Discovery of the Everyday, p. 104.

A national or state-oriented perspective in the exhibition and writing of art history in Central-Eastern European countries, and Lithuania in particular, does not necessarily need to provide a fixed notion of national identity similar to previous iterations of art-historical geography, such as the blood and soil variety of *Kunstgeographie*.[30] In direct response to the stance taken by exhibitions such as *After the Wall*, Piotr Piotrowski has argued that it is necessary to reconsider the fact of new borders, new walls, and new dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe. Arguing against overarching histories (of art) of the post-communist nations, Piotrowski calls for an exploration of the impact and workings of ideology specific to a location and which should serve, in art-historical terms, to 'stress the tensions between the local experience of art and the canon, rather than to place local art mechanically in the canonical framework'.[31] For Piotrowski, the local can espouse multidimensionality. 'Provincial' does not necessarily mean insular or backwards, but 'plural, heterogeneous, complex, cumulative processes constituting art-historical narratives'.[32] In this construction, the state serves as an apparatus of many networks, rather than merely a form of closed cultural or ethnic identification.

Such understanding requires a reconsideration of the concept of fixed nationality and the inclusion of aspects of social life that do not fit with a unified and homogenous idea of the national body. I have shown the ways in which works by Academic Training Group have focused on the contradictions of the Lithuanian space and its relation to the larger European or global geography, whether it be represented by a broken English sentence on a welcome-mat or by images of potential 'immigrants'. Such critically informed constructions of locality characterise some other Lithuanian artworks that are well known internationally. Lithuania's contribution to the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Villa Lituania* by Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas, has become one of Lithuania's most critically acclaimed works, while it is also a critical exploration of the country (fig. 6).[33] This work – an interdisciplinary project based on Lithuanian history and including, among other things, a pigeon race – charted the history of the historical *Villa Lituania* building, which had been the inter-war Republic of Lithuania's embassy in Italy. The building was taken over by the Soviet Union, but when the Soviet Union collapsed and Lithuania regained its independence the building became the property of Russia rather than Lithuania, so the artists treated it as one of the last remaining occupied territories of Lithuania. The project produced not only critical acclaim (it was given an honourable mention by the Venice jury), but also distinguished conditions in Lithuania in a manner that also elucidated international and local concerns. The international perspective arose through focusing on the complicated history of Lithuania in relation to a building that is of concern to Italy, Russia, and Lithuania itself; and although there was clearly a narrative of resistance in the work, it was not directed only towards the former Soviet 'enemy', but also to the bureaucracy of international diplomacy and art fairs. Moreover, its interdisciplinary form could hardly be considered 'stay-at-home timid by Western standards'.

30 For a critical reading and reinterpretation of the relevance of national art historiography, see T. D. Kaufmann, Toward a Geography of Art.
31 P. Piotrowski, How to Write a History of Central-East European Art? – Third Text 2009, vol. 23 (1), p. 6.
32 P. Piotrowski, How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?, p. 8.
33 Cf. http://villalituania.lt/ (accessed 8 April 2010).

The Lithuanian curator and critic Lolita Jablonskienė has argued that the Lithuanian art of the late 1990s '...is neither local nor international – lower than local and higher than international – because it is personal, biographical. It is not easily comprehended, and hopefully due to that it can't become a new package.'[34] Nevertheless, while paying careful attention to the dynamics of place, locality and history, the examples of Lithuanian art discussed in this paper do appear to make a contribution that is available to an international audience. Far from conveying merely national concerns of identity, or insular models of history, they may help to, at least provisionally, rewrite national art histories as narratives that can take account of the dynamics of place and power in contemporary Lithuania and Europe.

34 L. Jablonskienė, Nakon emancipacije – litavska umjetnost kasnih devedesetih / After Emancipation – Late 90s in Lithuanian Art. – The Baltic Times, p. 39.