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A NEW DEAL: POST-SOVIEIT REALITIES MEET WELFARE STATE MODELS.
IN WHAT WAY WILL THIS REFLECT ON THE ARTS?

MARGARETA TILLBERG &
JOHN PETER NILSSON
On May 1, 2004, ten new countries joined the European Union. This was the biggest expansion ever. To the hitherto 15 membership countries were added Cyprus, Malta, Slovenia and seven countries from the former Soviet block: the Central European Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, and the three Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The initiative for *A New Deal* came from Liana Ruokyte-Jonsson, Cultural Attaché, Embassy of Lithuania, Sweden. The project group of the seminar consisted of Christian Chambert, Johan Ettzler, John Peter Nilsson and Liana Ruokyte-Jonsson. *A New Deal* is a cooperation between the Lithuanian Embassy in Stockholm, the Baltic Cultural Centre of Stockholm City, the European Commission, Sweden and the Swedish AICA (International Art Critics Association). *A New Deal* was a follow-up to an earlier symposium on *Mild dictatorships*. The Association for Baltic-Nordic Cultural Exchange (Föreningen för Baltiskt-Nordiskt Kulturubyte) financed *A New Deal* seminar and the publication of this book. Hans Alldén, Director of the European Commission, Sweden, hosted the seminar.

The idea behind this seminar – *A New Deal: Post-Soviet Realities Meet Welfare State Models* – was to initiate a discussion from a cultural point of view, an angle the project group figured had hitherto not been considered enough in other media. The heading was intended to elicit reflection on the new conditions, first during the last decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, where the
Baltic States became sovereign states again, and secondly to give some thoughts to what the new conditions, now under the EU, would bring.

People working in the field of culture in the countries around the Baltic Sea were invited and asked to present their different perspectives. The keynote speakers’ presentations are printed here in full. Arunas Gelūnas from Kaunas and Margareta Tillberg from Stockholm talked about post-Soviet realities from the eastern and western shores of the Baltic Sea; Nomeda Urbonas and Gediminas Urbonas from Vilnius, and Rein Raud, from Helsinki and Tallinn, shared their views on experiences of artistic freedom in the Baltic countries before and after the Wall.

The participants in the panel discussion were Lolita Jablonskiene from Vilnius; Irina Sandomirskaja, Stockholm; Peo Hansen, Linköping (Sweden), and Rein Raud. The moderator was John Peter Nilsson, Stockholm.

The questions that *A New Deal* discussed were: In what way will this new deal reflect upon the arts? The Baltic countries are squeezed between post-Soviet realities and are now members of the EU. In this position, what role does the so-called Swedish model play in Realpolitik and from a cultural policy perspective? Artistic freedom has been one of the strongest driving forces for the development of the visual arts during the last century. In what ways do the experiences in the Baltic countries differ from those of Sweden in relation to the role of the art market and the grant system? Why are artists still important?

*A New Deal* had its starting point in the new Baltic EU countries’ attitudes and strategies during the nineties, once they had become independent from the Soviet Union and met new collaborating partners, of which Sweden was one. What came out of the seminar was that there was not, in fact, a contradiction between these two worlds. Now, almost 20 years after the fall of the Wall, it is rather a matter of finding new visions to unite both the old East and the West.

A certain dispute broke out when Peo Hansen, Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies at Linköping University, directed criticism at the EU by calling attention to the concept that there can only be a true Europe once Europe comes to terms with its identity – for example by “denazifying” its past.

Irina Sandomirskaja, Professor of Cultural Studies at Södertörn University College in Stockholm, followed this up by pointing out that the concept Europe was born as the consequence of a rape by a mythological Greek god – the development of Europe has always been violent since this incident. The question is if the democratic organisation of the EU can alter Europe’s acts of violence. No concrete answer was given. Instead the question was left open about finding new forms for a dialogue between preserving the unique national experiences or finding a common platform.

Another theme of discussion was globalization. The world has paradoxically both shrunk and become bigger. The globalization effects have also created new economical, cultural and religious conflicts. Is it important to defend national differences in this develop-
ment? The Baltic participants felt particular strongly about retaining their national identity within the new Europe.

What we are discussing today has to be established. We have to learn to understand that on some level we are always global. Our geography is disturbed, not only our physical surrounding, but also our economical, cultural and ethnical proximity. As this process has become more obvious in the current globalization, we have to start to navigate from our own experiences. But our experiences are not only global. My private experiences, rooted in my own private context, are equally valid as are collective experiences from a world that many of us share and inhabit together.

If I want to position myself in this disturbed geography, I have to tell a story – my story. If this story is true, it is no one else’s but mine. Of course, this creates an area for possible misunderstandings, which is also fertile soil for discussion and friction, an untranslatable distance between others and me. Today it is important to fight for a space in the world to tell one’s own story. It is not cyberspace and it is not ethno space. It is a mental space, within me and within my fellow human beings. And with this place defined, or in the process of definition – I have created the opportunity to communicate with other people.

Stockholm, February 2006

This book includes the whole seminar. The principal editorial work was finished at the beginning of June 2006 and it has not been updated since.