



Post-Nordic



The Rise and Fall of a Nordic Art Scene 1986–2006



Jonas Ekeberg



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Translated by René Lauritsen

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Contents

	Preface	7
	Introduction	11
1	Nordic Postmodernism 1986–1995	29
	Homecoming	35
	Metaphysics and implosion	39
	Other art scenes	43
	After the implosion	47
	Between the Nordic and the international	54
	Earth, water, air and fire	60
	Institutional crisis	64
	The end of a hegemony	67
2	New Art Scenes 1990–1995	75
	Outside the institutions	80
	A self-regulating entity	95
	A guide to urbanity	108
	Out of the backwater	122
3	A Nordic Art Scene 1996–1997	129
	Nordic utility	134
	Social and psychological pressures	136
	The urban scenes expand	139
	A global network	148
	The openness is a sign that much is closed	153

	Postmodern, postcolonial and post-feminist	158
	A parallel scene	161
	Facing the present	165
	European references	183
	An institution to match the new scene	190
4	The Nordic Miracle 1998–1999	195
	The Nordic paradox	199
	On a desert island	219
	At the centre of the Nordic art world	223
	The end of a narrative	227
5	The Long Nineties 2000–2002	237
	An overriding restlessness	244
	On the scrapheap of history	257
	The age of globalisation	267
	Profile – activity – dynamism	274
	Just how miraculous was it?	288
	We are back!	296
6	The End of an Institution 2003–2006	299
	From a position near the centre	303
	The radical institution	314
	Postscript	337
	Appendix	345
	Endnotes	346
	Bibliography	379
	Interviews and archives	402

Preface

This book is about the art world in the Nordic countries from 1986 to 2006, during the transition from postmodernism to what may be called “the period of contemporary art”.¹ To be more precise, it addresses this epochal shift in light of the relationship between two poles of the art ecosystem: the official Nordic *art institution* and various alternative and independent Nordic *art scenes*. One of the book’s central theses is that the interplay between these two poles is crucially important to art.

This book has a personal starting point. I myself have been a part of the above-described art world for quite some time, first as a student of fine art photography in the early 1990s and later as an artist, critic, curator and editor, from the mid-1990s to the present day. This time frame is important to understanding the book’s approach: it looks at the Nordic art scenes from the perspective of the nineties. Viewed from this angle, the postmodernism of the 1980s constitutes the backdrop of a new, strong 1990s art scene that attracted considerable international attention and would later become a platform for the significant politicisation of art in the 2000s.

The idea for this book came after I had spent some time removed from the art scene. From 2004 to 2009, I was the director of Preus museum, Norway’s national museum of photography. That job was as much about the history of photography and about running a museum as it was about contemporary art. When I took up the post of editor of the online art journal *Kunstkritikk – Nordic Art Review* in 2009 – which meant a return to more direct engagement in the field of visual art – I was struck by the shift that had taken place within the Norwegian and larger Nordic art scenes alike. They were utterly changed.

In Norway, especially in Oslo, a new generation of artists had emerged. Behind a range of new galleries, such as Willy Wonka Inc., Galuzin Gallery, Bastard, Rekord and TAFKAG, were artists who had distanced themselves from the “contextual art” of the late 1990s, adopting an outsider position in relation to the art institution and society. Using the internet, they had built networks of international contacts, but at the same time they seemed to be unabashedly working with and celebrating the local. One specific element missing from this scene, however, was the idea of a pan-Nordic conversation about art.

Five years previously, in 2004, the situation was very different: NIFCA – Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art was still an active institution, launching numerous exhibitions, publications and projects every year; *NU: The Nordic Art Review* was in the process of transforming from a print into an online journal; and Hamburger Bahnhof, a contemporary art museum in Berlin, held a vast exhibition of Nordic artists based in that city. But, even back then, something did not feel quite right. Several artists chose not to take part in the Hamburger Bahnhof show due to its Nordic framing. And *NU* had lost its regular, pan-Nordic funding. For its part, NIFCA had been existing under the looming threat of closure for years.

By 2009, this uncertainty surrounding the “Nordic project” had crystallised into absolute certainty. The production of Nordic group exhibitions had ceased altogether. *NU* failed to manage its transition to the internet and simply disappeared. NIFCA, too, had been shut down, following a decision made by the Nordic Council of Ministers. The year 2009 also saw the final joint Nordic exhibition in the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, or certainly at least the last to be seen for six years. Both the Nordic art institution and the informal Nordic art scene were disappearing.

This new situation represented a significant change in how Nordic art and the Nordic art world would come to function. My own generation of artists, critics and curators had derived great benefits from Nordic networks. I myself was educated in Norway, Finland and Sweden. I was the Norwegian editor of the Stockholm-based journal *Index* and briefly acting editor of the Helsinki-based journal *Siksi – The Nordic Art Review* (the precursor of *NU*). I also curated Momentum – Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2000. My professional life had inextricably developed with, between and among the Nordic countries.

However, the impact of the dismantling of the pan-Nordic art world affected people and places far beyond those directly involved in it. This book argues that the regional dimension was a key aspect of Nordic art of the 1990s and 2000s. As such, it was often greeted with scepticism, but the frequent rejection of “the Nordic” was almost as frequently followed up by new perspectives on the very same concept. Nordic exhibitions and projects, Nordic publications and seminars – indeed, the very idea of a Nordic art world – these were all important and significant. But by the late 2000s, these things had disappeared entirely.

The new situation was interesting. How could a major dimension of art simply be erased like that? And what made the idea of a distinctively Nordic art so repugnant to Nordic artists? If nothing else, it was the perfect time to look at Nordic art and the Nordic art scene from a historical perspective.

When I expressed these views in an application for the Norwe-

gian organisation FORART – Institute for Research within Contemporary Art, I got the go-ahead. FORART agreed to provide funding for this book as well as an archive and database chronicling the various agents and events within the Nordic art scene of the 1990s and 2000s. I wish to take this opportunity to convey my deep gratitude to the FORART team for their trust and patience. The project received subsequent support from Arts Council Norway, Fritt Ord (Freedom of Expression Foundation, Oslo), the Norwegian Nonfiction Fund, the Relief Fund for Visual Artists (Norway), the City of Oslo and the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland.

The project has been time consuming, and it would not have reached fruition without the help of a number of key individuals. The greatest thanks of all goes to Ane Hjort Guttu, who has been a most patient private and professional dialogue partner. Our children, Einar and Ole, buoyed my spirits beyond measure during this long process. My good friend and colleague Harald Østgaard Lund has likewise been an invaluable support.

In my professional life, the board as well as my colleagues at *Kunstkritikk* demonstrated great understanding and a keen interest in the project over the course of several years. The most ardent supporter was, without doubt, Kim West, the journal's Swedish editor from 2011 to 2014. Special thanks also goes to Petter Snare, chairman of the board from 2011 to 2017.

I am beyond grateful for the invaluable help provided by librarians and archivists at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts; the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; the Danish National Art Library and Danish National Archives, Copenhagen; the Art Library of Nationalmuseum and Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and the archives at the Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.

My peerless advisors on the work for this book were Håkan Nilsson from Södertörn University, near Stockholm; Jon-Ove Steihaug at Munch Museum, Oslo; Ellef Prestsæter at the University of Oslo; and the art historian Vilde M. Horvei, based in Oslo. The first two acted as supervisors during different stages of the project, Ellef provided invaluable editing and consultation and Vilde assisted with image editing and proofreading.

Parts of the manuscript have been perused by Tore Slaatta, Espen Rasmussen, Espen Ytreberg and Øivind Storm Bjerke at the University of Oslo. None of them hold any responsibility for the content within these pages, but I am very grateful for their comments and contribution. I also wish to thank editors Elin Maria Olaussen, Karen Christine Tandberg and Karin Nygård of Torpedo Press, as well as designer Carl Gürgens. All of them have demonstrated great faith in the project.

Finally, I owe the deepest thanks to my Nordic family: my late

mother, Ulla; my late father, Erling; and my sister, Charlott. My mother arrived in Norway from Sweden in the early 1960s, after the Nordic countries adopted a common labour market in 1954, offering an example of how private lives are impacted by political decisions. This book is about how such decisions have affected the realm of art.

Introduction

The period from 1986 to 2006 was one of the most expansive and productive ever seen within Nordic art. Over the course of these twenty years, the Nordic art scene went from being isolated and regionally restricted to, via a process of gradual internationalisation, almost total assimilation into the global art field.

This evolution affected both artistic and institutional aspects, and it encompassed the national art scenes in the five Nordic countries – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland – as well as the pan-Nordic art community. The latter manifested itself both through informal relationships and in institutions such as NIFCA – Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, the journal *NU: The Nordic Art Review* and the Nordic (that is, Finnish-Norwegian-Swedish) Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Sápmi and the autonomous areas Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Åland Islands also form part of the Nordic region. In the exhibition history outlined in this book, only four significant attempts at presenting the art of these areas arise: three exhibitions by the Nordic Arts Centre in Helsinki highlighting the art of Sápmi (in 1981), the Faroe Islands (1983) and Greenland (1990), and the grand postcolonial project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism*, in 2006. The latter was, as we will see, both a high point and the end point for NIFCA.

This book's subject is the common features of the art worlds of the Nordic countries. After more than a hundred years of artists and art professionals lobbying to set up pan-Nordic art institutions, it finally happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Working in conjunction with the various civic and national art scenes, these institutions contributed to fostering a highly productive arts situation, first within the framework of what I will call *Nordic postmodernism* (from circa 1986 to circa 1995), and then as part of “the period of contemporary art” (from around 1996 onwards). In its early stage, this second epoch was marked by the so-called Nordic Miracle: a new energy and dynamic within the urban art scenes that prompted greater international awareness of Nordic contemporary art. This success continued into the new millennium, while other parts of the alternative art scenes as well as the official Nordic art institution grew increasingly politicised. In the midst of this period of change, formal Nordic art institutions shut down and activities on the independent art scene subsided. This book asks: How and why did this happen, and what impact did it have on art in the Nordic region?

■ 74

Is there a Nordic art?

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Nordic artists and art historians repeatedly debated the issue of a specific “Nordic identity” in art.

Prior to the 1840s, the idea of a Nordic art was variously associated with Norse mythology and with Nordic nature. During the national Romantic, neo-Romantic and symbolist periods, the concept was expanded to include political and psychological issues. Then, in the interwar years, Nordic-international artist networks spurred a “Nordic-modified modernism”.² During the 1960s, the idea of a Nordic identity in art weakened in favour of a more internationally oriented neo-avant-garde, only to return in the mid-1970s in the form of a regionalism that placed emphasis on local identity.

A more backwards-looking vein of Nordism emerged in painting in the early 1980s, described as regional neo-expressionism. Once again, the natural landscape with its shifting light was presented as a distinctive feature of Nordic art. This conservative tendency was reinforced by the popularity of the exhibition *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting 1880–1910* at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1982, which had a huge impact on Nordic artists and art historians in the eighties. Together, critical regionalism and regional neo-expressionism constituted the core of the early postmodernist movement in the Nordic region.

The late 1980s saw a struggle between two invariably open and overlapping postmodern positions within the Nordic art field: a metaphysical position that clung to painting as its chief mode of expression – akin to what the American art critic Hal Foster calls a *reactionary postmodernism* – and an anti-metaphysical position that critically employed photography, conceptual objects and other “alternative” modes of expression, or what Foster dubs a *resistant postmodernism*.³ This last position was never brought to its full, logical conclusion in the Nordic countries; rather, it was one among several components of the amalgam of Nordic late modernism and the various postmodern directions, coming together to form what I call *Nordic postmodernism*.

As Nordic postmodernism assumed a hegemonic position around 1990, critics and artists began to reject the very idea of a distinctively Nordic art and of a Nordic art community. The Nordic art scene became “post-Nordic” just as Europe was in the process of becoming “postnational”.⁴ It was time to replace nations and regions with international concepts – within politics and art alike.

In the 1990s, a new generation made their mark on the Nordic art world, and it was this generation that finally broke away from modernism and “the Nordic”. Reaching back to the strategies of the neo-av-

ant-garde of the 1960s while opening up towards the social and political issues and diversity of the day, these artists ushered in a paradigm shift. This shift in the Nordic art scene forms the main theme of this book, which I associate with the establishment of *the period of contemporary art*. Among other things, it altered the concept of *contemporary art*, just as the meaning of *modern* had changed a hundred years previously. What had for decades been an open-ended, general designation for “all the art created in the present” gradually came to designate a particular epoch and a particular style. *Contemporary art* came to mean “that which emerges from within the conditions of contemporaneity”.⁵

The period of contemporary art

The transition from a postmodern to a “contemporary” state is primarily linked to a process of social, cultural and political globalisation. Its tipping point is often dated to 1989: the year the Berlin Wall fell. In the ensuing years, the Soviet Union collapsed, the EU took new steps towards integration, South Africa abolished apartheid, and the internet became public property. All this activity brought about an openness within the social and the political that greatly affected the realm of art. An accelerating, expansive European and international art field allowed scope for naive optimism, the critique of capitalism and explorations of social and material aspects of contemporary life. The American art historian Alexander Alberro put it in these terms in a lecture he gave in Oslo in 2008:

The years following 1989 have seen the emergence of a new historical period. Not only has there been the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the heralding of the era of globalization, but technologically there has been the full integration of electronic or digital culture, and economically neoliberalism with its goal to bring all human action into the domain of the market has become hegemonic. Within the context of the fine arts, the new period has come to be known as “the contemporary”.⁶

In the Nordic art world, the tipping point was reached a few years later, in the mid-1990s. Nordic postmodernism remained dominant up until 1995, especially in the large Nordic group exhibitions, such as the *Borealis* exhibitions and the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. As we will see, from 1996 onwards the new nineties generation dominated these exhibitions.

The post-Nordic situation involved an active rejection of “nature”, “landscape” and the idea of a distinctive “Northern light” with a simultaneous turning towards psychosocial themes and politicised modes of expression. The American critic and curator Kim Levin put it in these terms in 1996, in connection with the Nordic biennial *Borealis 8 – The Scream*: “In the past few years, the legendary northern communion with nature – cold purity, metaphysical solitude, conceptualised light

and space – has ceased to suffice for many artists as a fertile ground for artistic production. It has given way to an art of social and psychological pressures.”⁷ Paradoxically, it appears that the rejection of “the Nordic” paved the way for a new form of Nordism.

Towards the end of the nineties, the idea of a psychological and social Nordic art unfolded in a variety of international group shows. After the dawn of the new millennium, it was superseded by an art that more actively articulated the Nordic countries as a political site within a globalised postcolonial reality. Such a perspective was embedded in projects like *Whatever Happened to Social Democracy* at Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö in 2005 and *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* under the auspices of NIFCA in 2006. This book follows in the wake of the tradition of these exhibitions, relating their story within the wider history and sociology of art.

The new right

At the time of writing, the global political situation is precarious, fraught with difficulties: global economic imbalance coupled with environmental issues, religious and territorial conflicts and a growing influx of refugees have created a right-wing populist opposition in many Western countries – a population that wishes to reverse globalisation, both culturally and economically. The UK’s decision to withdraw from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as US president – both events that took place in 2016 – reinforced the overall impression of a nationalistic turn in Western politics unparalleled since the 1930s.

The populist and nationalist tendencies that we could group under “the new right” have had a palpable impact on Nordic cultural politics, especially since the liberalist Anders Fogh Rasmussen became the prime minister of Denmark in 2001. Rasmussen immediately launched a war on the cultural field. “This will be a very comprehensive renovation [of the arts and science]. We want to clear up these intermediate layers that sap resources and direct attention away from what is truly important. This will undoubtedly raise cries of fervent protest from those affected,” he said in his New Year’s address to the nation in 2002.⁸ Among the things Rasmussen wanted to axe were “superfluous committees and councils and institutions”. These policies spread to all the Nordic countries and eventually caused, among other things, NIFCA’s closure in 2006.

A Nordic art world

Within the Nordic art world, opinions varied on the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA, 1997–2006) and its predecessor the Nordic Arts Centre (1978–1996). Some believed that it had too much power, others that its results were too feeble. Such views notwithstanding,

we may certainly say that the centre represented the *idea of a pan-Nordic public sphere for art*.

What is a public sphere, anyway? The political philosopher Hannah Arendt describes the public realm as “the common world”, that which “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other”.⁹ During the twenty years covered in this volume, the pan-Nordic art sphere was certainly such a common world where artists, students, critics, curators, directors and audiences shared their art experiences and conducted discussions. This art conversation was a highly vibrant and persistent part of the art scenes in the five Nordic countries. It was another platform for art, falling somewhere between the national and the international. Many had their work mentioned or their texts published in Nordic journals. Even more people read these journals, becoming familiar with artistic developments in the other Nordic countries. Students moved freely across the region’s borders, and upon completing their studies, they set up galleries and organised exhibitions and events with and featuring Nordic colleagues. These networks soon expanded to encompass international artists and art educators. In this way, the Nordic art scene became a Nordic-international art scene.

Of course, we should not equate the *Nordic art sphere* with the *organisation* known as the Nordic Arts Centre/NIFCA. Other actors, ranging from small journals to national museums, also contributed to developing the conversation and discourse on Nordic art. Nevertheless, the organisation – domiciled on the small island of Suomenlinna, outside Helsinki – was an important anchor point. The sociologist Anthony Giddens states that institutions are “the more enduring features of social life”.¹⁰ And even though the great theorist of the public realm, Jürgen Habermas, would say that a *state-supported public sphere* is a contradiction in terms (he wanted the public sphere to be as free from state ties as possible), the situation has been, in certain respects, the other way around in the Nordic countries: state-funded institutions have been instrumental to maintaining and developing the public sphere.

Historical background

The Nordic region is an *international region*. In contrast to a *nation*, it does not award citizenship, it does not have a parliament, judicial seat or press. As such, the sense of a *Nordic public sphere* depends entirely on a willingness to co-organise and set up institutions. This also holds true within the field of art. From the mid-nineteenth century on, regional artists have wanted the Nordic countries to actively support inter-Nordic conversations on art. The first Nordic Konstnärskongressen (Assembly of Artists and Art Teachers), held in Gothenburg in 1869, issued an appeal to the Nordic governments, imploring them to carry out two

measures: to strengthen purchases of Nordic art for the national museums, and to provide free shipping of art via the railways. The assembly also decided to arrange Nordic artist meetings every three years. In this way – through three specific, concrete initiatives – the idea of a common Nordic art institution was born.¹¹

■ 43

The appeals to the Nordic governments were subsequently repeated several times. During World War I, in 1915, the Danish art historian Carl V. Petersen envisioned pan-Nordic collaboration in the art world as a model for Nordic collaboration on a more general political level. He advocated for a joint Nordic journal, Nordic exhibitions, the purchase of Nordic art and – the *pièce de résistance* – a “central museum for Nordic art”.¹² The Nordic Art Association, which was founded immediately after World War II, in 1945, later compiled its own list of similar wishes. The timing, closely linked to the two World Wars, is no coincidence. In both cases, the Nordic nations closed ranks against external pressures, and collaborating within the realm of art was seen as an important part of the countries’ defence against war and fascism.

The Nordic Art Association’s signature event was a recurring, semi-official exhibition of Nordic art. The first opened in Oslo in 1946, and over a period of thirty years, sixteen took place altogether.¹³ A representational ideology (artists represented not only their country, but also their medium) and salon-style presentation permeated these exhibitions. The reason was, most likely, the national funding, which put the task of arranging the exhibitions in the hands of national juries, which might in turn be divided up into various disciplinary juries, for painting, sculpture, printmaking and so on. This left little space for conceptual curating.

■ 50–51

Reflecting the gradually growing scope of the ambitions of Nordic cultural politics in general, more pan-Nordic art institutions opened over the course of the 1960s. The first was a Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in 1962. There had been attempts at making this a joint pavilion for all the Nordic countries, but in the end Denmark and Iceland refrained from taking part. Denmark had its own pavilion since 1930, and Iceland was a young nation (independent since 1944), and did not have the necessary resources available at the time. What ultimately became a Norwegian-Swedish-Finnish collaboration brought new sources of tension and conflict to light in the Nordic art world. The first exhibitions, in 1962, 1964 and 1966, went off in good order, but in 1968 the international youth revolt hit the biennale with full force, causing a number of countries to close their pavilions – either for security reasons or for political ones. For example, members of the Swedish-Danish Situationist faction *Drakabygget/Bauhaus Situationniste* squatted in the Swedish section of the Nordic Pavilion.¹⁴

■ 52

The first series of Nordic exhibitions funded using *pooled* funds

was *Den nordiske ungdomsbiennalen* (The Nordic Biennial for Young Artists). The initiative was launched by the Nordic Commission for Culture, an inter-state body, in response to discontent with the conservative exhibitions arranged by the Nordic Art Association.¹⁵ These biennials for artists under thirty years of age were held in Copenhagen in 1966, Helsinki in 1968 and Oslo in 1970.

■ 56–57

By the early 1970s, the economic situation and cultural policies in the Nordic region finally aligned in favour of closer Nordic cooperation in the field of culture. This led to the adoption, in 1971, of the Agreement Concerning Cultural Co-operation, which in turn gave the Nordic Art Association the funding needed to take the Nordic exhibitions out of the hands of national juries. After extensive discussion, the association appointed the Swedish art historian Staffan Cullberg to select the theme and contributors for the subsequent iteration, set to open at Liljevalchs in Stockholm in 1976.

This was an important change. Having a single person responsible for choosing the artists meant that endless conversations on eligibility rules and representation were replaced with a specific theme and artistic criteria applied by the organiser. *Öga mot öga* (Eye to Eye) became the first major recurring Nordic exhibition to adopt criteria focusing on an overarching aesthetic and political discourse, rather than revolving around national as well as medium-specific representation.¹⁶

■ 67

Incidentally, this groundbreaking exhibition became the last in the series. As *Öga mot öga* toured the Nordic countries, the Nordic Arts Centre – also made possible by the Nordic cultural co-operation agreement – opened in 1978. That centre took on many of the functions that artists and art professionals had been requesting for more than a hundred years, including the task of organising recurrent Nordic art exhibitions.

A new phase

With the Nordic Arts Centre, the region's art world entered a new phase. This was the first institution that could, on an autonomous basis, realise the lofty ambitions and desire for collaboration propagated by Nordic artists for so long. The centre represented the final institutionalisation of the idea of a pan-Nordic art community.

According to its founding articles, the Nordic Arts Centre was established to “develop and coordinate Nordic collaboration” and to cover the entire spectrum of visual modes of expression: “painting, sculpture, drawing, prints, textile art, crafts, applied arts, design, photography, architecture et cetera”.¹⁷ Its overall objective was “to enrich the Nordic cultural scenes”.¹⁸ However, craft, design and architecture never became priorities at Suomenlinna. More than anything else, it became a centre of visual arts. The centre's first director, the Finnish art historian Erik

Kruskopf, was given more or less free rein to mould and shape the new institution. At the opening, Jaakko Itälä, the Finnish minister of education, underlined that the new centre should be able to cultivate experiments “without being bound by commercial concerns”.¹⁹

■ 70

The Nordic Arts Centre fully found its feet by 1981, having launched an extensive array of exhibitions and seminars, a Nordic art journal, an archive of Nordic artists and a studio residency programme. And, during the 1980s and early 1990s, it flourished. However, Nordic cultural politics would shift from an idea of *Nordic identity* in the 1970s to an idea of *Nordic utility* in the 1990s. The latter marked a more economic-administrative perspective on Nordic cultural collaboration, and in fact the term *Nordic utility* (*Nordisk Nytte*) came from the name of a report that would set the course for Nordic collaboration after Finland and Sweden joined the European Union in 1995.²⁰

This report resulted in the Nordic Arts Centre’s closure in 1996. However, in a stroke of political genius performed by its then director Anders Kreuger, the centre rose from the ashes the following year as the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art. Note the updated name – one emblematic of the new cultural-political paradigm. While it may seem unconnected, the same forces underlying the larger political shift also pushed Nordic art into *the period of contemporary art*. Regardless of this epochal change, NIFCA fulfilled many of the same functions as the Nordic Arts Centre had. It was an institution that embodied and gave lasting form to the idea of a Nordic public sphere for art.

The awareness of such a public sphere had reached an all-time low when NIFCA was shut down in 2006 – an event largely met with shrugs of indifference within the Nordic art world. It is true that a handful of artists and journalists declared support for NIFCA and took up the issue with the Nordic Council of Ministers – the “owner” of the institution. However, the decision to shut down the institution was veiled in bureaucratic jargon. The issue never became politicised, and so it never met any substantial resistance.

Under pressure

Why did the pan-Nordic cultural dream fold? Why was institutional collaboration across the Nordic art scenes dismantled? And why did this turn of events not meet any significant resistance? The abolition of NIFCA was carried out by the Danish government under the leadership of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, adding a sheen of neoliberal ideology and rhetoric to the decision. However, more than one force was at work here, and the political right does not bear sole responsibility. On the one hand, various internal forces within the art scene pulled in directions that counteracted Nordic collaboration. Among other things, a general

scepticism emerged towards the idea of a Nordic identity in art. That idea had a rebirth during the early 1980s, but then, once postmodernism developed more fully, it was emphatically rejected again towards the end of the decade. Leading critics called the idea of a Nordic art community a “romantic delusion”²¹ and Nordic art a “quasi-fascist myth”.²² In 1992, the Swedish critic Erik van der Heeg stated that “those who engage with Nordism – whether politicians, academics or people from various branches of cultural life – are ... those for whom the ship sailed quite some time ago”.²³ A focus on regional identity simply didn’t fit the internationalised and globalised conversation dominating the art scenes in the Nordic region in the 1990s and 2000s.

General political developments in Europe and the overall process of globalisation also counteracted Nordic cultural collaboration. It is true that the Nordic governments chose to uphold, and even renew, the major Nordic political institutions when Finland and Sweden entered the EU.²⁴ However, the things that underpinned Nordic collaboration – cultural, economic and political necessity – had changed. Quite simply, focusing on Europe and on the Nordic region at the same time was something of a challenge. Increased access to cheap flights and constant developments in electronic communication also contributed to a reduced need for inter-Nordic dialogue. Before this time, it was rare for Nordic artists to visit the US. Following the deregulation of airlines in the 1980s, though, such a journey was suddenly within reach for most. All these changing circumstances taken together meant that fostering and maintaining a Nordic art community as an intermediary between the national and international art scenes no longer felt necessary. As Erik van der Heeg points out, the forces that drive conversations and discourses on art rarely circulate at a regional level: “Everyone knows that the real conflicts, conversations and alliances either take place at a national – not to say local – level or at an entirely internationalised level”.²⁵

In other words, the dismantling of pan-Nordic art collaboration resulted from pressure on multiple fronts. The overall artistic developments and processes of globalisation and neoliberal cultural policy-making were certainly significant, and corresponding forces were at work on the alternative and independent art scenes, causing a decline in informal, non-institutional Nordic relationships as well.

New regionalisms

The postnational situation of the 1990s largely operated on the idea that art exists independent of national and regional ties. However, around the dawn of the new millennium, a new generation of critics began to challenge this position. One of the first to see the need to reintroduce geography in conversations about art was the British theorist Irit