

Spontaneous Encounters between Baltic Designers in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s through Exhibitions: Transforming Notions of Performativity and Experimental Design Practices

Karolina Jakaitė

Vilnius Academy of Arts
Maironio 6, LT-01124, Vilnius
karolina.jakaite@vda.lt

Triin Jerlei

Vilnius Academy of Arts
Maironio 6, LT-01124, Vilnius
triin.jerlei@vda.lt
ORCID: 0000-0002-4151-2542

While the design economies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had been closely interconnected under the Soviet occupation, the collapse of the Soviet empire also brought new conditions and possibilities. As mass production declined, art design and design exhibitions became increasingly important. This article analyses and compares two exhibitions, *Neon-88* (Klaipėda, 1988) and *Ruum ja Vorm V* (*Space and Form V*, Tallinn, 1989–1990). Although they emerged within a similar period and included designers from all three Baltic countries, their organisational structures and outcomes differed fundamentally. *Neon-88* exemplified a new type of exhibition operating outside institutional frameworks and comprising largely avant-garde objects, whereas *Ruum ja Vorm V*, organised by the Estonian Art Fund, reflected an attempt to remodel existing structures. Through a close examination of these two exhibitions, the authors identify broader developments in Baltic design during the final years of the Soviet Union and critically analyse them from a contemporary perspective. The article explores the nature of the encounters that took place between individuals and organisations in these two case

studies in order to analyse the changing conceptions of “Baltic design.” During the 1990s, the reconstruction of national narratives became a central concern in all three Baltic countries.¹ The two exhibitions examined here already reveal this emerging tendency, raising the question of how design practices and designers responded to the need to reposition themselves and their cultures within these shifting paradigms.

Keywords: postmodernism, neon, interior design, poster design, experimental design, art design.

This controversial decade, which produced both depression and hope at the same time, in a way closed up in the face of the new decade, under new political conditions—much like a sphinx.²

Sirje Helme, *Lost Eighties*, 2010

This quote by the Estonian art historian Sirje Helme aptly summarises the 1980s as a turbulent period. As the Soviet Union, a vast totalitarian empire, entered its final stages of collapse, it generated a complex mixture of diverse reactions, hopes, and fears. How would design function in a completely new economic system? How would the hierarchies and connections, long shaped by Cold War borders, shift in a fundamentally new world? This article addresses these questions through the case study of the Baltic states. Located on the Western border of the Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had interconnected design cultures, partly for geographical, historical, and cultural reasons, and partly due to Soviet politics. At the same time, each country maintained its own language, artistic and design traditions, aesthetic preferences, and their own understanding

1 Beata Halicka, “National or Multicultural? A Common Narrative about History in the Baltic States after 1991,” *Social Sciences* 12, no. 8 (2013): 443, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12080439>.

2 Silver Vahre, “Discovery and Staging of the Environment on Urban Space, the Environment and Photographic Posters in the 1980s. A Witness Account,” in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 67.

of national design. This article examines, through the study of two exhibitions, *Neon-88* (Klaipėda, 1988) and *Ruum ja Vorm V* [Space and Form V] (Tallinn, 1989–1990), how the concept of Baltic design as a shared cultural sphere was transformed in the late 1980s.

Joint Baltic exhibitions in design and other fields had become an established practice by the late 1980s. Indeed, this tradition can be traced back to the interwar period, when the three countries first became independent. One of the most notable examples was their participation in the 1937 International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris.³ During the Soviet period, regular joint Baltic exhibitions bringing together Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were organised across a wide range of disciplines, including applied arts, trade shows, and the visual arts. However, as these events were coordinated by the central All-Soviet Artists' Union, they offered limited scope for independent initiative. They may be therefore understood as examples of colonial structures forcefully reorganising local cultures while creating new connections and narratives. At the same time, these structures initiated meaningful individual contacts that had a lasting impact on Baltic design cultures. For example, the close friendship between the Lithuanian design professor Feliksas Daukantas (1915–1995) and the Estonian design professor Bruno Tomberg (1925–2021) is well documented, as is its significant contribution to the development of the departments of industrial art in the State Art Institutes in their respective countries.⁴

Within the context of this article, both exhibitions, *Ruum ja Vorm V* and *Neon-88*, are understood as design exhibitions, although contemporary authors or the participants and organisers themselves did not necessarily define them within a single field of artistic production. Many of the exhibited works could equally be regarded as art objects, while numerous participants identified themselves not as designers but as artists, architects, or interior designers. Therefore, one of the contributions of this article is its analysis of the intersections and exchanges between these different fields at the end of the 1980s. During this turbulent time, many factories across

3 Lijana Natalevičienė, "Giving Sense to Identity: The Role of Ethnic Design in State Ideology," *Leida 5* (2024), <https://leida.artun.ee/en/issues/stubborn-compromises-in-production/giving-sense-to-identity-the-role-of-ethnic-design-in-state-ideology>.

4 Kai Lobjakas, *Bruno Tomberg: disaini leiutamine / Invention of Design* (Tallinn: ETDM, 2025).

the Baltic states closed or experienced financial difficulties. Consequently, design—which in the Soviet context had been oriented towards industrial production—was compelled to reinvent itself. For that reason, exhibitions assumed a crucial role as “interlinked sites of personal and professional ‘entanglement,’ connected entities that have capacity to sustain and develop multiple relationships.”⁵

Methodology

Judy Willcocks emphasises the importance of working with unarchived material “before it has been moulded by institutional or professional concerns.”⁶ The authors of this article were guided by a similar premise: as the period in question has only recently become sufficiently distant to be approached as a subject of design history, the majority of available sources are primary, while only a limited number of objects can be found in institutional collections. Some sources—for example, the photographs preserved in the private archive of Aili Ermel (b. 1960)—had reportedly not been viewed by the designer herself since the time they were taken, and therefore presented both unique research possibilities and particular methodological challenges. That said, this study builds upon the work of the few researchers who have previously addressed this turbulent period, most notably Jüri Kermik and his project *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*.⁷ Under the leadership of Kai Lobjakas, the Estonian Museum of Applied Arts and Design has likewise assembled an important collection of relevant objects. In Lithuania, these phenomena remained largely unstudied and were gradually forgotten owing to what Lolita Jablonskienė has described as the “delayed” emergence of interest in the history of Lithuanian design.⁸ Scholarly attention began to develop only through Jüri Kermik’s collaboration

- 5 Harriet Atkinson, “‘Lines of Becoming’: Misha Black and Entanglements through Exhibition Design,” *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 1 (2020): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa046>.
- 6 Judy Willcocks, “Archives, Collections and Curatorship: Live Archive Projects in a Design History Learning Setting,” *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 2 (2021): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa047>.
- 7 *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018).
- 8 Lolita Jablonskienė, “Lietuvos dizaino istorijos kuravimas,” *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 107 (2022): 57–81, <https://doi.org/10.37522/aaav.107.2022.135>, 59.

with Karolina Jakaitė between 2016 and 2018,⁹ followed by renewed interest from the designer and researcher Deimantė Česokaitė in 2023, whose research still remains unpublished.¹⁰

Because the late 1980s were a hectic period, the surviving source material is diverse but fragmentary. Certain aspects can be reconstructed from the archival records of the Estonian Art Fund, the institution responsible for organising exhibitions.¹¹ The variety of languages and terminology in these documents vividly illustrates the turbulent nature of the period. The cover of the archival folder relating to *Ruum ja Vorm V*, for example, bears the title *Eesti NSV Kunstifond, Näituste sektor* (The Art Fund of the Estonian SSR, Exhibition Sector). The list of participants is bilingual, in Estonian and English, while some forms already identify the organisation as *Eesti Kunstifond* (The Estonian Art Fund). Documentation relating to the loan of works from Latvia and Lithuania contains pre-printed texts in Russian, although the forms themselves are completed in English. By contrast, the transport documentation for works arriving from Latvia and Lithuania is entirely in Russian. These linguistic shifts reveal an emerging effort to decolonise inter-Baltic relations by substituting Russian, the former language of communication, with English, aligned with Western structures.

Interviews proved essential for reconstructing the lists of exhibition participants as well as organisational and artistic practices. Cheang, Irani, Rezende, and Suterwalla have discussed the complexities of working with personal narratives, noting that different stories and memories do not necessarily align.¹² For this reason, the present study does not seek to offer a single narrative but instead includes multiple voices and experiences. To this end, designers and design specialists from four countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland—were interviewed, including both exhibition participants and individuals who had been involved in other capacities

- 9 Karolina Jakaitė, "Design Connections between Lithuania and Estonia: Exhibitions, Contexts and the Brightest Creative Sparks," in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 238–58.
- 10 Deimantė Česokaitė, "Meninio dizaino raiška ir kontekstai XX a. 9 dešimtmetyje: Lietuvos ir Estijos atvejų palyginamasis tyrimas" (MA thesis, Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2023).
- 11 ERA.R-1954.2.654.
- 12 Sarah Cheang, Katie Irani, Livia Rezende, and Shehnaz Suterwalla, "In Between Breaths: Memories, Stories, and Otherwise Design Histories," *Journal of Design History* 36, no. 2 (2023): 175–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epac038>.

or had simply attended the events. It is also important to acknowledge certain difficulties that accompanied the research. In particular, interviews with Latvian designers revealed gaps that may partly be attributable to the authors' limited command of the Latvian language.

The methodology adopted in this article may therefore be described as a reconstruction of memories. Unlike the material reconstructions often employed by historians in material culture studies or ethnography, this research, owing to financial and time constraints, sought to reconstruct immaterial narratives, memories, facts, and objects—a process that often proved equally challenging. For example, during the first interview with Tōnis Vellama (b. 1965), no visual material of the lighting objects he had exhibited at Ruum ja Vorm V was available. Vellama sketched the lamps from memory during the interview in order to explain their construction and design.

Neon-88: experimental performativity and the turn towards art design

In June 1988, a symposium of Baltic designers took place in Klaipėda, culminating in the opening of the exhibition *Neon-88*. The exhibition's abbreviated title reflects a conceptual framework most clearly articulated through the visual solutions created by Estonian designers; their creative processes and interpretations will be discussed in the concluding sections related to this exhibition. The symposium itself originated from an initiative by a group of young designers from Klaipėda, most of whom were in their thirties and early forties [Fig. 1]. According to its main initiator, the designer Vakarīs Bernotas (b. 1958), the project emerged from an ambition “not to be outdone by sculptors,” who had been holding influential contemporary sculpture symposia in Smiltynė since 1977. Kęstutis Mickevičius (b. 1957), then secretary of the Klaipėda branch of the Lithuanian SSR Union of Designers, established in 1987, similarly recalls this original motivation.

Since the symposium took place during the final years of the Soviet regime, its official title had to conform to the relevant rules and directives of the period. It was therefore called *Klaipėda Illumination Problems and Ways to Solve Them*. Officially, its purpose was to investigate the possibilities and



1. Participants of *Neon-88*, Smiltynė, 1988, photo from Aili Ermel's private collection

Neon-88 dalyviai, Smiltynė, 1988, nuotrauka iš Aili Ermel asmeninio archyvo

future directions of urban illumination in the city of Klaipėda. As Bernotas explained in 1988:

This is the first gathering of designers in Smiltynė. We worked for two weeks—in two stages. During the first, we prepared sketches and projects. During the second, we began to realise them. The Klaipėda Economic and Statistical Workshop of the Republican Repair and Installation Factory, led by Stasys Girdenis, extended a helping hand in a truly collegial spirit. Its employees patiently, without regard for working hours, tried to implement all of our ideas.¹³

Indeed, it is worth emphasising that these remarks should not be understood as propaganda statements by the symposium organisers, typical of the press of that time; rather, the excellent organisational conditions of the creative workshops are remembered by all participating designers even 36–37 years later. The exhibition may also be regarded as one of the earliest curated design exhibitions in the Lithuanian context.¹⁴ The organisers invited

13 Vytautas Kudarauskas, "Miesto vaizdai naktį ir dieną, arba mintys po dizainerių simpoziumo," *Tarybinė Klaipėda* (July 24, 1988): 8.

14 Design exhibitions held up to that point included lists of participants and exhibition architects but did not identify curators.

Laima Cieškaitė-Brėdikienė (1936–2012), arguably the most prominent Lithuanian design researcher of that time, to curate the symposium.

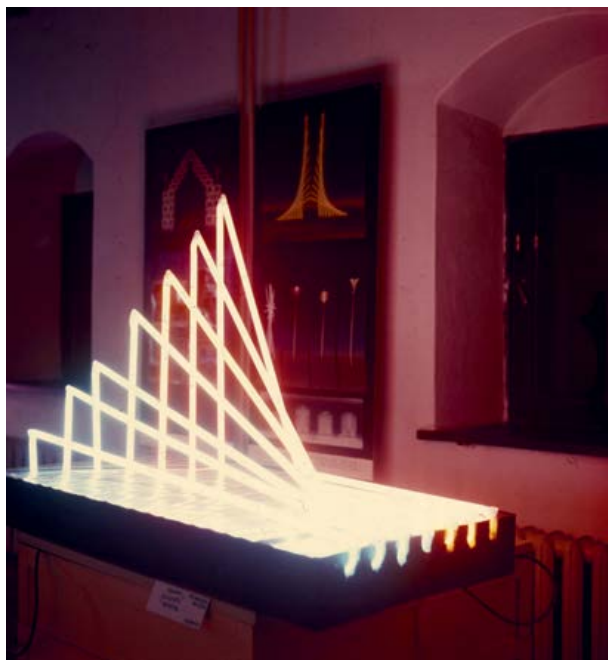
The central theme of the symposium was largely determined by the available material. The organisers had access to a substantial quantity of neon tubes for the creative workshop, which was both relatively inexpensive and it readily obtainable from Klaipėda's advertising workshops. As Bernotas commented on the idea, "We decided to revive this forgotten element of advertising—visual agitation—decoration—neon."¹⁵ Neon was by no means a novel medium in the field of advertising, as since the 1960s, it had been used to create visually sophisticated and highly expressive signage. However, according to several participants, the principal problem was the lack of quality: existing neon advertisements frequently displayed distorted images, missing illuminated segments or letters, and malfunctioning electrical systems that produced annoying sounds. Although the Klaipėda symposium was officially conceived as an initiative to create lighting solutions for urban spaces, the organisers deliberately preserved a high degree of creative freedom by requiring only conceptual proposals. This offered an opportunity for experimentation, enabling the participants to pursue ambitious spatial and artistic ideas. Even the Latvian participants—Uģis Piešiņš (b. 1958), Varis Dzērve (b. 1961), and Dace Zeltiņa (b. 1958)—who already had considerable experience working with neon, recalled approaching the symposium with a degree of scepticism: "Here comes that neon again."¹⁶ However, in the case of Klaipėda, they identified the "absence of a customer or client" as a factor that liberated their practice and redirected it towards artistic installations.

Although no complete inventory of the created works has survived, existing descriptions and photographs reveal a series of highly expressive individual and collaborative installations [Fig. 2–4].¹⁷ Some participants combined neon with other materials and artefacts, a strategy that can be considered a form of postmodern design practice. For example, the designer Audrius Klimas (b. 1956) created a pyramid-shaped installation entitled *Ice*, composed of glass blocks specially adapted to accommodate neon

15 Kudarauskas, "Miesto vaizdai," 8.

16 Varis Dzērve, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Riga, August 14, 2024.

17 Not all works were authorised; moreover, none were preserved or acquired by the city or by any museum collection.



2, 3. Objects at the *Neon-88* exhibition, Klaipėda, 1988, photos from Kęstutis Mickevičius's private collection

Objektai parodoje *Neon-88*, Klaipėda, 1988, nuotrauka iš Kęstučio Mickevičiaus asmeninio archyvo





4. Object at the
Neon-88 exhibition,
Klaipėda, 1988,
photo from Kęstutis
Mickevičius's private
collection

Objektas parodoje
Neon-88, Klaipėda,
1988, nuotrauka iš
Kęstučio Mickevičiaus
asmeninio archyvo

lighting. His twin brother, the designer Alvydas Klimas (b. 1956), created at least two projects, including *Old Clouds*, in which neon was combined with glass fibre fabric, and another work incorporating theatrical filters. Romualdas Martinkus (b. 1956) combined neon with sculptural materials such as concrete and metal in a composition entitled *Neojus*. His artistic intentions reveal an interest in both philosophical reflection and formal expression: "Life is the alternation of light and darkness. It accompanies everything. I believe that illumination elements should have properties that enable the expression of a certain idea both during the day and at night."¹⁸ Arūnas Juozapaitis explored the possibilities of applying neon to the design of water environments, while Eduardas Bytautas and the brothers Kęstutis and Valdas (b. 1958) Mickevičius proposed lighting solutions for the Danė River. They also created the composition *Pyramid*, in which lighting was organised through the contrast between horizontal (green) and vertical (red) lines or numbers.



5. Estonian design installation and designers Jüri Kass and Aili Ermel, Klaipėda, 1988, photo from Aili Ermel's private collection

Estijos dizaino instaliacija ir dizaineriai Jüri Kassar bei Aili Ermel, Klaipėda, 1988, nuotrauka iš Aili Ermel asmeninio archyvo

The Latvian participants likewise produced expressive sculptural compositions. Dzerve proposed an unexpectedly radical concept for illuminating the Danė embankment by combining neon compositions with natural gas flames. Piešiņš presented two projects, *Luminous Floors* and *Arch of Perestroika*. Although neither the symposium nor the exhibition itself articulated direct political protest, Piešiņš's latter work was remembered by many participants as one of the subtly critical projects that resonated with the atmosphere of national revival movements in the late Soviet period.

Among the Estonian participants, Jüri Kass (b. 1956) created the installation *Rain*, composed of pale blue and red neon tubes combined with softly draped fabric [Fig. 5]. According to a contemporaneous article discussing its potential uses, the work "would certainly be suitable for a café or a lobby." In practice, however, it remained a conceptual artistic installation produced solely for *Neon-88*, and Kass himself recalls its making primarily as a creative experiment.¹⁹

19 Jüri Kass, interview by Triin Jerlei and Karolina Jakaitė, Tallinn, March 11, 2024.



6. Aili Ermel and Kalle Toompere, *Neon-88*
poster, 1988, photo by Aili Ermel

Aili Ermel ir Kalle Toompere, *Neon-88*
plakatas, 1988, Aili Ermel nuotrauka

Among the participants interviewed for this study, one of the most vividly remembered objects was the poster [Fig. 6] created by the Estonian designers Kalle Toompere (b. 1958) and Aili Ermel (b. 1960). The Estonian participation was coordinated by Silver Vahtre (b. 1953), a prominent figure in Estonian poster design. According to Vahtre, the 1980s in Estonia marked the era of a “poster boom” or, in his and Jüri Hain’s words, “the golden age of poster art,” during which “posters became an active focal point.”²⁰ It is therefore hardly surprising that three of the four Estonian participants in Klaipėda—Kass, Toompere, and Ermel²¹—were young but already recognised poster designers. All were graduates of ERKI Design programme, which enjoyed a strong reputation in the Baltic states for its emphasis on art design orientation, regardless of students’ individual specialisations.

20 Silver Vahtre, “Discovery and Staging of the Environment on Urban Space, the Environment and Photographic Posters in the 1980s. A Witness Account,” in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 85, 87.

21 The fourth Estonian designer was Ene Unt (b. 1960), a graduate of the ERKI metal programme.



7. Photograph from the *Neon*-88 poster staging sessions, 1988, photo from Aili Ermel's private collection

Nuotrauka iš *Neon*-88 plakato inscenizavimo sesijų, 1988, nuotrauka iš Aili Ermel asmeninio archyvo

Live participation and performativity were crucial to the process of creating the poster, documented through a series of photographic sessions.²² These actions took place on the beach at Smiltynė, where potential poster compositions were tested during live performative experiments. One series utilised the metal structures of a children's playground, combining them with the designers' own bodies arranged in poses recalling Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Another composition emerged through playful experimentation with natural materials—specifically, Baltic sand shaped into a pyramidal form. This latter image was ultimately chosen as the prototype for the final poster design [Fig. 7]. At first glance, these interventions invite comparison with land art or certain ecological campaigns that gained particular visibility during that period. Yet a closer study of contemporary Estonian graphic design and poster culture suggests different interpretations.

22 This emerged during the interviews, most notably in the interview with Aili Ermel (interview by Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, April 16, 2025), and had already been suggested in the interview with Jüri Kass (interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, March 10, 2025).

Photographic staging had become one of the most innovative experimental practices developed by a younger generation of Estonian designers throughout the 1980s. This approach distinguished Estonian poster production from that of their Lithuanian counterparts and positioned it much closer to postmodern art. As Vahtre has observed:

The exacting standards set for artistic quality were in line with the understanding that design had an organic relationship with high art and, rather than obscure the message, the ambivalence of the image was the hallmark of a good 'product.' Staged poster art was an attempt to manage the living environment by making visible spaces that it reacted.²³

The *Neon*-88 posters were produced using silkscreen printing and appeared in several colour variants, including terracotta and yellow. The Estonian designers were responsible not only for the poster but also for the exhibition's entire visual identity, including stickers and labels accompanying the exhibited works. As a playful gesture, they inserted the advertising slogan "We travel onward with new friends" in all three Baltic languages: in Lithuanian, "*Keliaujame toliau su naujais draugais*"; in Latvian, "*Ceļš turpinās ar jauniem draugiem*"; and in Estonian, "*Teekond jätkub uute sõpradega*." Another seemingly inconspicuous element was the inclusion of a barcode. Initially inserted as a playful motif or as an attribute of graphic sophistication,²⁴ it can today be interpreted retrospectively as an almost prophetic sign of the emerging capitalist system. Likewise, the slogan in the three national languages may now be read as anticipating the path towards independence of the Baltic republics or even foreshadowing the unity embodied in the legendary Baltic way.

From this perspective, the exhibition also reveals key transformations that were particularly important for the Lithuanian design field. Foremost among these was the long-standing dominance of industrial design and technical aesthetics in Soviet Lithuania. Lithuania, the only one of the three Soviet Baltic republics, hosted a Vilnius branch of VNIITE²⁵ since

23 Vahtre, "Discovery and Staging," 103.

24 Most interviewees remembered the *Neon* symposium as "just having a very good, fun time."

25 For a more detailed discussion, see Triin Jerlei, "And We Had to Do Better Than Abroad: The Local Vilnius Branch of VNIITE, All-Union Research Institute of Industrial Design,

1966, to which, according to official allocation procedures, most graduates of the Vilnius Art Institute (today, Vilnius Academy of Arts) Department of Design were assigned. Until the late 1980s, all design exhibitions were typically organised in relation to the anniversaries of this department, Institute of Technical Aesthetics, or initiatives led by the design bureaus. *Neon-88*, by contrast, emerged as a self-initiated project undertaken by young designers without any directive from above. For a younger generation of Lithuanian designers, it was like a sudden flash of light in the darkness of industrial design. A symptomatic expression of this “pessimistic and constrained situation” can be found in a 1987 series of four publications dedicated to design issues.²⁶ These texts articulated an atmosphere of urgency, referring—somewhat ironically—to designers as “dinosaurs” in an attempt to affirm their relevance and avert their disappearance as a professional category. Among the key issues identified were the absence of exhibitions, as well as their irregularity and fragmentation.

Although *Neon-88* and the subsequent exhibition show few explicit signs of direct political protest (with the exception of a composition by Piešiņš depicting a hammer and a sickle), the broader intellectual climate of Lithuanian design at the time was charged with ideological debate. In this context, *Neon-88* could be perceived as a site of emerging optimism and a possibility of imminent transformation. In a student protest at the Vilnius Art Institute in late autumn 1988, participants held a poster declaring: “Design is art. When will the men of the Design Department understand this? Engineers to KPI and VISI.”²⁷ [Fig. 8] For the younger generation of designers, the central issue was the need to move beyond the established industrial and engineering paradigm and to experiment with art-oriented approach to design. This shift was also underscored by another protest slogan clearly

in Soviet Lithuania,” *Acta Academiae Artium Vilmensis* 103 (2021): 149–88, <https://doi.org/10.37522/aaav.103.2021.84>.

26 Irena Tiškutė, “1. Dinozaurai, Jūs mums reikalingi! Arba ką gali dizaineris, uždarytas ‘narvelyje,’” *Vakarinės naujienos* (February 3, 1987): 2; idem, “2. Dinozaurai, Jūs mums reikalingi! Arba Kas ištis ranką dizaineriui,” *ibid.* (February 4, 1987): 2; idem, “3. Dinozaurai, Jūs mums reikalingi! Arba Kas sutrikdys tylą dizaino padangėje,” *ibid.* (February 5, 1987): 2; idem, “4. Dinozaurai, Jūs mums reikalingi! Arba Kas dizaino priešai ir draugai,” *ibid.* (February 6, 1987): 2.

27 KPI is the Lithuanian abbreviation for Kauno politechnikos institutas (Kaunas Polytechnic Institute), while VISI stands for Vilniaus inžinerinis statybos institutas (Vilnius Institute of Civil Engineering).



8. Protest outside the Vilnius Art Institute, December 1988, photo by Algimantas Žižiūnas, Lithuanian Central State Archives, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Protestas prie Vilniaus dailės instituto, 1988 m. gruodis, Algimanto Žižiūno nuotrauka, Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

visible in the same photograph: "PABUSKIME" (Let's Wake Up), written in significantly larger letters. In this context, it is useful to refer to the insights of the Lithuanian art researcher and critic Skaidra Trilupaitytė, who has examined artistic life in Lithuania at the end of the Soviet era and the beginning of independence through a number of analytical categories. One of the most significant among these is *pakilumas*, translated as "elevation" or "eminence":

Elevation is the gap of a community or society from both the legally regulated order and the **grey everyday life**. The rhetoric of "enlightenment" and self-criticism that emerges under new circumstances (and the accompanying "restoration of truth") often reflects the logical contradiction of dominant institutions. [...] It designates a state that has engulfed most members of a given community and signals a historical break, a **spontaneous** determination to transform a reality that no longer corresponds to ideals.

It should be noted that the notion of spontaneity highlighted by Trilupaitytė is also relevant in the context of the exhibitions under discussion. A comparable form of spontaneity is evident in their Baltic dimension: among the nineteen participants in the *Neon* symposium, four were Estonian and three Latvian. Although the organisers stated that they intentionally sought international participation and representation from across the Baltic states, no formal open call or competition was announced. Instead, participants were invited through existing networks and personal contacts. For instance, Audrius Klimas already knew Uģis Piešiņš from a symposium held in Kuldīga (“Dizains Kuldīgā ’85,” Latvia), where he also met the Lithuanian designer Vida Zamalytė (1944–2004).²⁸ It is therefore plausible that young Estonian designers were likewise invited through Latvian contacts.

Particular importance may also be attributed to the very naming of the exhibition, *Neon*, an English word. In contrast to Russian, which had increasingly dominated official communication during the Soviet era, English began to circulate alongside the revival of national languages. In this regard, Jüri Kermik’s insight is particularly pertinent: “In addition to the period of the pre-war Estonian independence (‘Estonian time’) reverberating as an etalon from the past, there was growing awareness of ‘International Time,’ which, having been cut off since 1945, was becoming more accessible.”²⁹ This growing awareness of “international time” would become even more pronounced in the context of *Ruum ja Vorm V* exhibition and throughout the 1990s more broadly.

Ruum ja Vorm V: transforming practices and relations in design

Ruum ja Vorm was a series of avant-garde exhibitions initiated in 1969 by Bruno Tomberg, one of the most influential design theorists in Soviet-era Estonia. Trained as an interior architect, Tomberg led the development of the Industrial Art curriculum at the Estonian State Institute of Art. The curriculum later evolved into a separate faculty, which Tomberg headed between 1966 and 1982 and again from 1988 to 1993. Tomberg’s dual

28 The inability to interview her significantly complicated the entire research process, as she had maintained excellent connections with Estonian designers when organising earlier exhibitions, and Latvian respondents also mentioned her as one of their principal contacts.

29 Jüri Kermik, “Time and Place: Discourse Continued,” in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 205.



9–11. *Ruum ja Vorm V* exhibition featuring the object by Jānis Straupe, 1990, photos from Albertas Krajinskas and Jūratė Bučmytė's private collection, LATGA, Vilnius 2026

Paroda *Ruum ja Vorm V* su joje eksponuotu Jānio Straupės objektu, 1990, nuotraukos iš Alberto Krajinsko ir Jūratės Bučmytės asmeninio archyvo, LATGA, Vilnius 2026



interest in interior environments and the designed objects that surround humans underpinned the exhibition series, which, as its title emphasised, aimed to assign equal weight to both space and form. In total, five exhibitions were organised: in 1969, 1972, 1976–1977, 1984, and 1989–1990. The avant-garde nature of the series was widely acknowledged across the Soviet Union, as it had no direct parallels in other Soviet republics. An analysis of the exhibited works highlights a notable absence of Soviet propaganda in all five exhibitions. While in the Soviet context design was typically considered a discipline oriented towards industry, the vast majority of works presented at *Ruum ja Vorm* were experimental in nature. Only a limited number of objects were acquired for functional use as furniture, but none entered mass production. As Krista Kodres has observed: “Interior design exhibitions, whose connection to the real improvement of the Soviet environment always remained marginal, provided the opportunity for many creative people to maintain and develop their professional identity.”³⁰

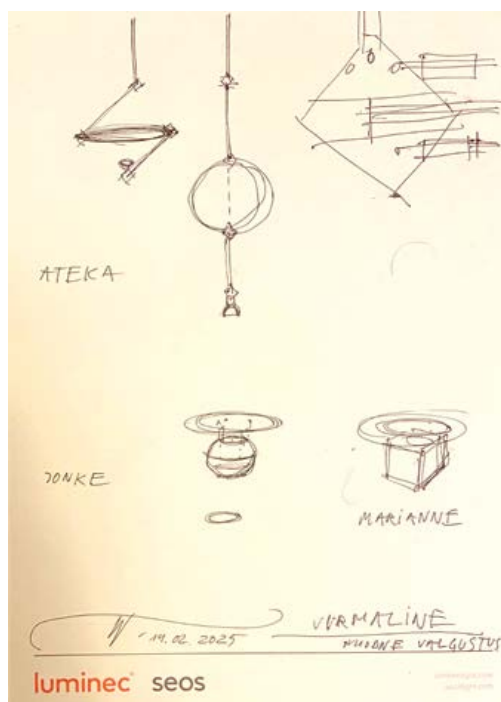
30 Krista Kodres, “Toivo Raidmetsa provokatiivne esteetika,” in *Raidmets*, ed. Toivo Raidmets (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2011).

As noted above, *Ruum ja Vorm V* was the final exhibition in the series, opening on December 15, 1989 [Figs. 9–11]. By that time, Bruno Tomberg was no longer involved, and curatorial responsibility had shifted to a younger generation. Several characteristics distinguish this final exhibition from its predecessors. First, as the Soviet Union was in its final years and perestroika had significantly altered the systems of power, the mechanisms of control had significantly weakened, as will be discussed in greater detail below. Second, while the first four exhibitions had included exclusively Estonian participants, *Ruum ja Vorm V* involved designers and artists from Latvia, Lithuania, and even Finland (early discussions also mention plans to include Poland, but these did not materialise). Thus, *Ruum ja Vorm V* constitutes a particularly significant case study for analysing the negotiation of regional design relations among these four neighbouring countries in a weakening political climate of control and in the context of reform movements in the Baltic republics.

Although the exhibition aspired to an international scope, the entire organising committee was Estonian; consequently, a more precise description would be an Estonian exhibition with international guests. In total, the exhibition included 57 works by Estonian designers, 22 by Lithuanian designers, 17 by Latvian designers, and 7 by Finnish designers. It should be noted, however, that several entries were co-authored, most commonly by designer couples. In terms of participants, there were 36 Estonians, 14 Lithuanians, 24 Latvians, and 9 Finnish designers. One of the Estonian participants, interior designer Gildas Stokas (b. 1959), was born in Lithuania. After moving to Estonia to study interior architecture at the Estonian State Institute of Art, he remained in Tallinn following his marriage to the Estonian designer Signe Stokas (b. 1959). For *Ruum ja Vorm V*, the couple designed a screen [Fig. 18].

Latvian and Lithuanian participants responded to an open call directly, whereas the Finnish section was organised by the Finnish Designers' Association Ornamo.³¹ For this reason, the Finnish contribution appears somewhat distinct from the Baltic displays. While Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian works consisted predominantly of experimental objects, the

31 Jüri Kermik, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, March 10, 2024.



12. Sketch of the lamps *Ateka* and *Jonke*, presented at *Ruum ja Vorm V*, drawing by Tõnis Vellama, 2025

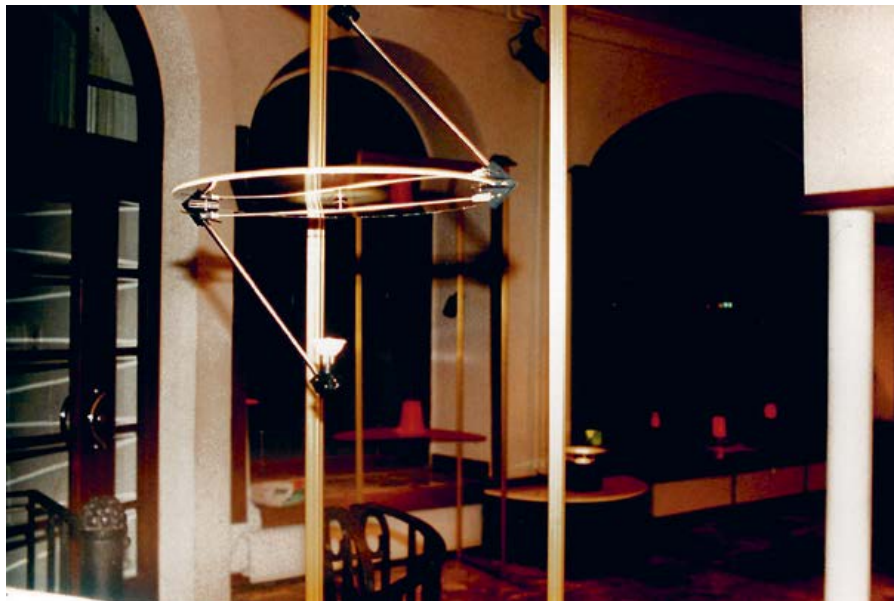
Šviestuvų *Ateka* ir *Jonke*, pristatytų parodoje *Ruum ja Vorm V*, eskizas, 2025, Tõnio Vellamos piešinys

Finnish display focused largely on functional furniture, including Yrjö Kukkapuro's (1933–2025) chair design and Juha Lähti's and Raimo Räsänen's (b. 1944) office furniture. Some exhibits were not even contemporaneous, such as Perttu Mentula's (1936–2009) spatial object *Quadrato rumbiato* (1978). All Baltic participants were required to submit their works by a specified date, after which the committee selected the final participants. In the Finnish case, Ornamo selected the participating designers, who then chose which works to exhibit.³²

Among the Lithuanian participants, Virginija Matiukaitė³³ stands out. The young Lithuanian designer, a graduate of ERKI in interior design (1986), presented three works at the exhibition. The Lithuanian designer couple Albertas Krajinskas (b. 1956) and Jūratė Bučmytė (b. 1958), both active in the field of art design at the time, vividly remember the demanding

³² Simo Heikkilä, interview by Triin Jerlei, Jyväskylä, July 1, 2025.

³³ She was a designer whose brief creative career this study seeks to reconstruct, although archival information remains scarce. She graduated from the ERKI interior design programme in 1986 under the supervision of Väino Tamm and passed away at a very young age.



13. Tõnis Vellama, *Ateka* lamp, 1989, photo from Tõnis Vellama's private collection

Tõnis Vellama, *Šviestuvas Ateka*, 1989, nuotrauka iš Tõnio Vellamos asmeninio archyvo

journey to this exhibition. For them, it was an important event, during which they encountered Estonian design and some examples of Finnish industrial design in situ for the first time.³⁴ Gildas Stokas similarly recalls that more participants arrived with works that were ultimately not included in the exhibition.³⁵

The competition for the overall exhibition design was launched in April 1988. In total, nine proposals were submitted. The jury—comprising Toivo Gans, Juta Lember, Krista Kodres, Vilen Künnapu, E. Holm, M. Kallamees, and T. Jürna—selected the proposal by Toivo Raidmets (b. 1955).³⁶ At that time, Raidmets was already emerging as one of the key exhibition designers of the period. In both a 1990 interview for the Estonian National Television³⁷ and an interview conducted for this research,³⁸ he highlighted

34 Albertas Krajinskas and Jūratė Bučmytė, interview by Karolina Jakaitė, Juodkrantė, July 9, 2024.

35 Gildas Stokas, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 19, 2024.

36 "Ruum ja Vorm 5," *Kunst ja Kodu* 32 (1990): 46.

37 Ebe Nõmberg and Krista Kodres, "Ruum ja Vorm V: 1," Estonian National Television, Tallinn, January 6, 1990, 25 min 51 sec, <https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ruum-ja-vorm-v-1>.

38 Toivo Raidmets, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 17, 2024.

his access to the Italian design magazine *Domus* as a decisive influence on his career. This reflects the broader impact of Italian design discourse, widely considered a pioneer of a certain type of postmodern interior design, on late 1980s Baltic design culture: Varis Dzērve, Gildas Stokas, and Vytautas Kibildis (b. 1954) similarly mentioned *Memphis* as an important source of inspiration.

The theatrical style characteristic of postmodernism is clearly visible in the exhibition design [Fig. 15]. As Raidmets himself described it:

Plastic columns, filled with compressed air, helped to fill the excessively large exhibition hall. Large triangular podiums with water spots, fountains and packet glass blocks filled with bubbling water, planned for the whole perimeter of the room (uncompleted due to the author's poor engineering design) and numerous exhibits produced by the Estonian Art Foundation bear witness to the plentiful material resources of that time. At the same time a whiff of change was already in the air and this exhibition was the last manifest of Estonian postmodernism. Socialist illusions were replaced by capitalist practicality.³⁹

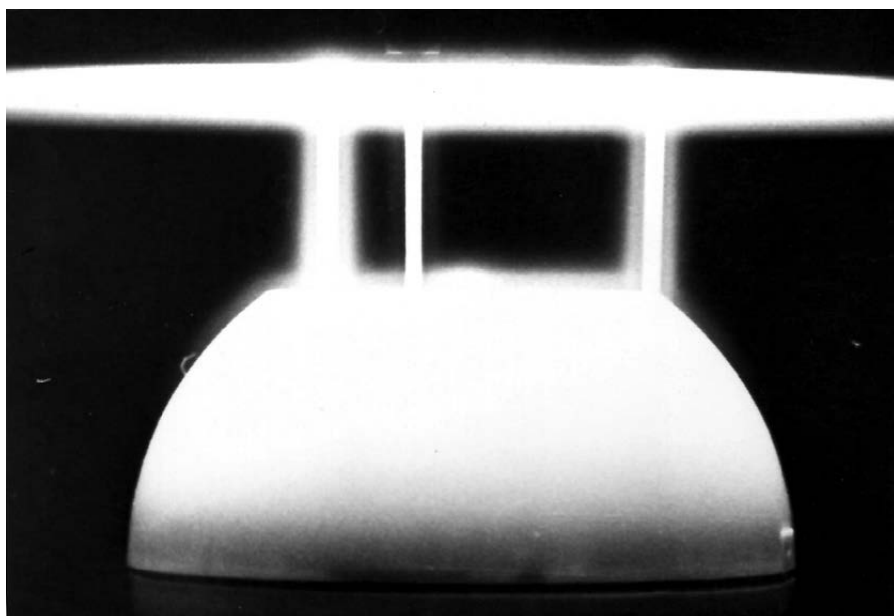
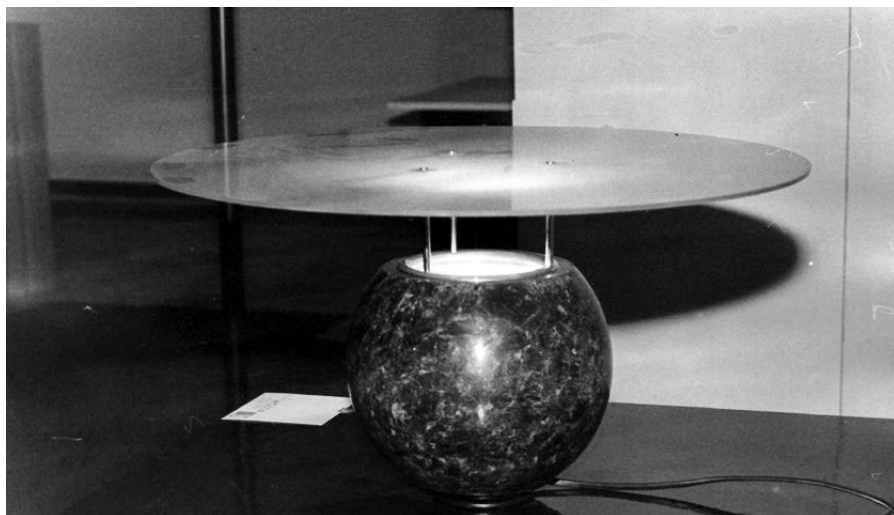
Mait Summatavet has suggested that the exhibition design functioned as a constructed landscape for the objects, with the columns acting as trees.⁴⁰

The location of the exhibition was also somewhat unexpected. While previous *Ruum ja Vorm* exhibitions had taken place at the Tallinna Kunstihoone (Tallinn Art Hall), the most prestigious gallery in Tallinn operated by the Artists' Union, *Ruum ja Vorm V* was instead relocated to the Exhibition Pavilion on Pirita Road, a space typically reserved for trade fairs. This shift suggests an attempt to bring design closer to broader audiences. Additionally, it allowed for a significantly larger exhibition space. As was customary in the exhibitions organised by the Art Fund, the exhibits were available for purchase. However, the prices were so high that only a single object was ultimately sold.⁴¹

39 Raidmets, *Raidmets*, 39.

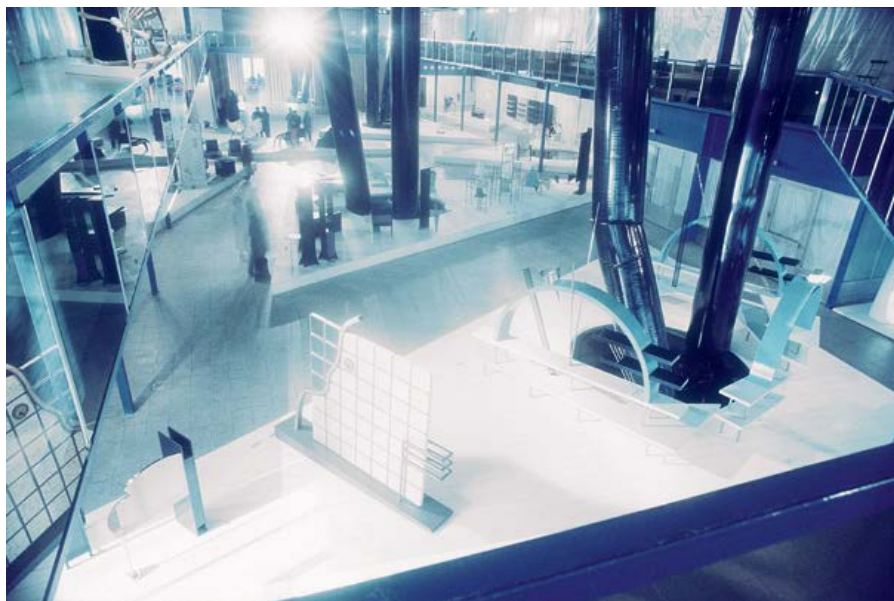
40 Ebe Nõmberg and Krista Kodres, "Ruum ja Vorm V: 2," Estonian National Television, Tallinn, March 21, 1990, 18 min 43 sec, <https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ruum-ja-vorm-v-2>.

41 Gildas Stokas, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 19, 2024.



14. Tõnis Vellama, *Jonke* lamp, 1989, photos from Tõnis Vellama's private collection

Tõnis Vellama, Šviestuvai *Jonke*, 1989, nuotraukos iš Tõnio Vellamos asmeninio archyvo



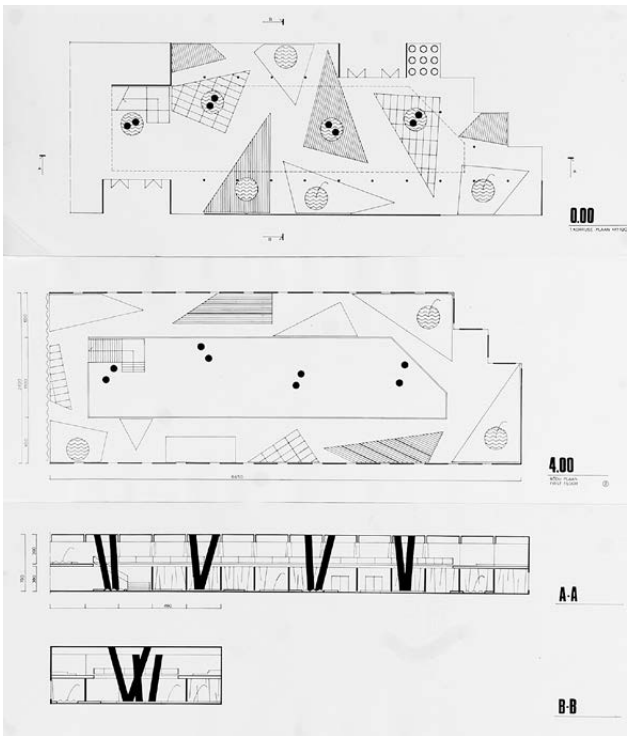
15. *Ruum ja Vorm V* exhibition view, photo from Toivo Raidmets's private collection

Paroda Ruum ja Vorm V, nuotrauka iš Toivo Raidmetso asmeninio archyvo

Several prizes were awarded to participants. The City of Tallinn prize was granted to the Latvian designer Tenis Grasis (1925–2001), while the Estonian Designers' Union prize was awarded to Raimo Räsänen and Juha Lähti. The Baltic Prize, sponsored by the Estonian Ministry of Culture, went to the Latvian designers Inese Mailite (b. 1959) and Ivars Maitlis (b. 1956), while Tea Tammelaan (b. 1964) received the Estonian prize sponsored by the Design Section of the Estonian Artists' Union. The Grand Prix, sponsored by the Estonian Artists' Union, was awarded—perhaps symbolically—to Toivo Raidmets for the design of the exhibition itself [Figs. 16–17].⁴² The reason can be deduced from Mait Summatavet's observation that the exhibition display itself constituted a work of design, reflecting the strong tradition of exhibition design in Estonia since the 1930s.⁴³ In this sense, awarding the Grand Prix to Raidmets may also be understood as a gesture acknowledging that tradition.

42 Triin Ojari, "Divergences in Interior Design: Interior Design Awards," in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 172.

43 Nõmberg and Kodres, "Ruum ja Vorm V: 2."



16, 17. Exhibition plans for *Ruum ja Vorm V* by Toivo Raidmets, photos from Toivo Raidmets's private collection

Toivo Raidmets, Parodos
Ruum ja Vorm V planai,
nuotraukos iš Toivo
Raidmetso asmeninio
archyvo

The exhibition design offers a more implicit commentary on the realignment of power structures. Estonian and Finnish exhibits were placed together on the main level, while Latvian and Lithuanian objects were positioned on the upper gallery. This arrangement suggests an attempt by the organisers to distance themselves not only metaphorically but also physically from the other former Soviet states. The same idea was articulated by Jüri Kermik and Mait Summatavet, both interior architects, who stressed the perceived affinity between Estonian and Finnish design traditions, while suggesting that Lithuanian and Latvian practices were more traditional.⁴⁴ However, such narratives were not exclusive to Estonian discourse: Lithuanian design critic Laima Cieškaitė similarly emphasised the importance of vernacular traditions in Lithuanian design.⁴⁵

Arguably, these imposed narratives, which were not necessarily grounded in the objects themselves, can be seen as a legacy of Soviet applied arts and trade exhibitions, which often sought to define a mythical essence of distinct national traditions while reducing individual artists to representatives of their respective states. For example, the Finnish participants Ahti and Rita Taskinen rejected the idea that their work should be presented as a Finnish display, instead emphasising that they primarily represented themselves rather than Finland.⁴⁶ This tension was also addressed by Krista Kodres in her review in *Sirp ja Vasar*, where she questioned the narrative of nationalism while recognising its convenience in a period of transition. Kodres instead juxtaposes the Baltic displays with the Finnish section.⁴⁷

Kodres aptly characterised the objects displayed at *Ruum ja Vorm V* as “different styles, directions, visions. There are searches for roots and attempts at mimicry.”⁴⁸ Indeed, all Baltic exhibitions discussed in this article highlight an impulse to position oneself within a global field. They draw on a wide range of references to various works and tendencies, both local and international. One example is Eero Jürgenson’s (b. 1960) chair *Fook* from Estonia. Constructed from cardboard, it echoes Frank Gehry’s *Easy Edges* series (1972), albeit in a completely different form. Similarly, Varis Dzērve

44 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 2.”

45 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 1.”

46 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 1.”

47 Krista Kodres, “Unistus paremast,” *Sirp ja Vasar*, January 26, 1990, 8.

48 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 1.”



18. Screen by Signe and Gildas Stokas, 1989, photo from Gildas Stokas's private collection

Signės ir Gildo Stokų širma, 1989, nuotrauka iš Gildo Stoko asmeninio archyvo

and Uģis Piešiņš from Latvia employed neon as a symbol of contemporaneity in their *Furniture for F.S.F. Club*, while Jonas Venckūnas' (b. 1945) table from Lithuania evokes the bright colours of Memphis design. Such references could be interpreted as simple acts of mimicry. However, a more nuanced reading suggests an effort to position oneself within a broader international design discourse. Piotr Piotrowski has described such dynamics as a form of self-colonisation, a concept that captures an important dimension of the overall process.⁴⁹ At the same time, the article argues that it also reflects an attempt to claim belonging within Western design traditions in order to escape the label of the "Other." As Mait Summatavet observed, "The visitor can see where we belong."⁵⁰

49 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 166–67.

50 Nõmberg and Kodres, "Ruum ja Vorm V: 2."

At the same time, the lack of functionality at the exhibition was a point of concern for some experts. Jüri Kermik, in particular, noted the risks of these new tendencies in Baltic interior design, suggesting that in two or three years there might be nothing left to offer for production and that “we have ruined ourselves with these exhibitions.”⁵¹ In contrast, Lai-ma Cieškaitė adopted a more favourable position, arguing that such experimental approaches also made functional design more understandable to the general audiences.⁵²

This element of rebellion against the system was embedded in the structure of *Ruum ja Vorm* from the beginning. Designer Tõnis Vellama participated in the exhibition with two lamps, *Ateka* and *Jonke* [Figs. 12–14]. Among the participants, Vellama is notable for several reasons. First, he was only twenty-four years old at the time and still a student at the Estonian State Institute of Art (now the Estonian Academy of Arts). Second, he was already employed at the Danish design office Jacob Jensen. Thus, his trajectory illustrates a broader shift: for a younger generation of designers, the exhibition no longer functioned mainly as an alternative space to Soviet institutional structures, but rather as a platform oriented towards the West. In the interview, Vellama emphasised both the symbolic significance and the prestige associated with participation in the *Ruum ja Vorm* series for younger designers at the time. Even if Western and Nordic design appealed to design students in the 1980s, the legacy of Bruno Tomberg endowed the series with a distinct aura of honour and privilege.⁵³

Importantly, a key difficulty during this period was material scarcity and the lack of production bases. Throughout the Soviet period, designers typically relied on resources of their place of employment, whether factories or art production workshops. Many younger designers and interior architects, however, did not have access to such institutional support and were forced to seek alternative avenues. For example, Tea Tammelaan, a young interior architect, recalls in the interview that she received assistance from her father, who worked at a woodworking workshop. The upholstery for her chair was made by hand from an old synthetic-fur jacket that she had found in an abandoned building. On the other hand, certain

51 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 2.”

52 Nõmberg and Kodres, “Ruum ja Vorm V: 1.”

53 Tõnis Vellama, interview by Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, February 14, 2025.

materials were paradoxically easier to obtain: Tammelaan encountered no particular difficulty in acquiring a glass plate for her table. She hand-painted the table with a brush and printing inks to achieve a gradient from green to purple. The printing inks were also sourced through informal networks and personal contacts.⁵⁴

The same tendency was characteristic of many other works. Tõnis Vellama, for instance, incorporated elements from Estoplast lamps into his own designs,⁵⁵ while Gildas Stokas relied on personal networks to gain access to the workshops of the Estonian State Institute of Art.⁵⁶ Linda van Deursen has argued that, paradoxically, restrictions can generate creative potential and often function as a driver of more radical design.⁵⁷ The same idea is reflected in the interviews with participants in *Ruum ja Vorm V*, where material restrictions were seen as a positive challenge that replaced earlier forms of creative limitation. As Toivo Raidmets noted: “If you have no budget, then your mind starts to work.”⁵⁸ From this perspective, the lack of materials was a small price to pay, outweighed by the expanded field of creative possibilities.

Recontextualising from a contemporary perspective

This raises a broader question: what exactly do these exhibitions reveal about the condition of Baltic design in this period? It was not only geopolitical structures that were being renegotiated, but also the function and institutional organisation of design in response to rapid political and economic transformation. A useful point of reference is Mart Kalm’s review of the Estonian exhibition *Acta’87*. Given its fairly similar focus and overlapping group of Estonian participants with *Ruum ja Vorm V*, Kalm’s findings can also be applied to the present analysis. He identifies one of the defining forces of contemporary design as an emerging synthesis of different art forms, replacing rigid divisions between design, architecture, and visual arts as separate fields. Kalm further suggests that the experimental character of design and interior architecture in late 1980s was dictated by systemic

54 Tea Tammelaan, interview by Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, October 21, 2025.

55 Tõnis Vellama, interview by Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, February 14, 2025.

56 Gildas Stokas, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 19, 2024.

57 Ott Kagovere, “Piirangud on disaineri parimad abimehed. Intervjuu Linda van Deurseniga,” *Müürileht* (December 23, 2024).

58 Toivo Raidmets, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 17, 2024.

change: as the figure of the client gradually disappeared, these fields were compelled to reinvent themselves, often adopting more adventurous and playful modes. In this respect, a parallel can be drawn with *Neon-88*, which likewise proposed an exploratory and open-ended approach to an uncertain future.

Although these exhibitions were significant in their own time, by 2025 they have acquired additional layers of meaning, including in relation to the objects themselves. The loosening of political control allowed designers to present works that would previously have been excluded by institutional structures. Many of these objects radically challenged the idea of function. For example, Janis Straupe's chess table and chair, exhibited at *Ruum ja Vorm V*, are distorted so that no angles conform to ninety degrees, producing an object that appears to be perceived from a different perspective [Fig. 11]. Such works entail moments of ambiguity that can be read as dissent, whether deliberate or not. Indeed, several works from this period have later been interpreted as political, even though their authors did not explicitly frame them as such. From a contemporary perspective, the performative experimentality of many works might appear political; however, participants themselves often recall the general atmosphere of the exhibitions as light-hearted.

This sense of lightness and hope was characteristic of design exhibitions of the period, even though the broader context was marked by economic instability and financial constraint. In this regard, it is useful to return once more to the *Neon-88* poster [Fig. 6] and consider a contemporaneous reading of its composition. Such an interpretation is supported by several contextual associations. The poster's composition and bright typography divide the word NE-ON into two parts, where NE (Lithuanian "no") is separated from ON (read as the English "on"⁵⁹). Although the graphic designers themselves did not ascribe such meanings to the work at the time

59 It is also worth noting that expressions such as "NO," "WE ARE AGAINST," "FOR," and "YES" functioned as characteristic slogans of the late Soviet period, expressing attitudes towards the political system, the occupation, bureaucracy, or the communist regime. As a contextual reference, the Estonian group of designers and applied artists ON Group (ON Grupp) can also be mentioned; see Kai Lobjakas, "Critically Forward: Developments and Encounters in Estonian Applied Art and Design in the 1980s," in *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, ed. Jüri Kermik (Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018), 152–54.

and generally considered their practice apolitical,⁶⁰ this retrospective reading opens another interpretive layer: a gesture of NO to the old structures shaped by totalitarian stagnation, and ON or YES to new possibilities.

Conclusions

Neon-88 remained a local and singular initiative, without sustaining the continuity encoded in its own informal slogans. For younger Lithuanian designers, however, it became a decisive moment in the emergence of *art design*—within a broader context that could be seen as a counterpoint to “the lost 1980s” and the subsequent dominance of industrial design. By contrast, the Tallinn exhibition, which brought together designers not only from the Baltic countries but also from Finland, nevertheless became the final iteration of the *Ruum ja Vorm* tradition.⁶¹ In both cases, manifestations of experimentalism and performativity are evident, yet it should also be noted that these practices still operated within late Soviet institutional conditions and relied on available resources, without the constraints of formal budgets or private sponsorship, as would soon become the norm. The Tallinn exhibition has retrospectively been described as “a feast held during the plague.”⁶²

Spontaneity, as a unifying organisational and managerial principle, emerges as a key feature of both exhibitions and was emphasised in all interviews with participants. Both exhibitions are united by an orientation towards the sphere of art and design-based experimentation as a critical practice that converged with other artistic and architectural phenomena of the time. The only directly intersecting figures are two Latvian designers—Varis Dzerve and Ugis Piešinš—and Lithuanian design researcher Laima Cieškaitė-Brėdikienė, who engaged with both exhibitions.

While these two exhibitions differ in organisation, scope, and intention, one element unites them: in both cases, interviewees noted an absence of sustained individual contacts between participating designers. In *Ruum ja Vorm V*, there was an opening event where participants met, but none of the interviewees recall substantial interaction. Similarly, in *Neon-88*, each

60 Aili Ermel, interview by Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, April 16, 2025.

61 It should be noted that in 1999 Leonhard Lapin curated the exhibition *Ruum ja Vorm 2000*. Despite its similar title, this project presented an overview of Estonian architecture of the preceding century and was in no way connected to the original *Ruum ja Vorm* exhibition series.

62 Raidmets, interview by Karolina Jakaitė and Triin Jerlei, Tallinn, August 17, 2024.

participating country formed its own group, communicating primarily in national languages.

These exhibitions represent early attempts to organise international design exhibitions outside of the all-seeing totalitarian framework, as well as efforts to realign power structures within the Baltic region. While these transitional attempts show the Estonian side seeking to shape the narrative within an international context, they may also be understood as necessary steps towards negotiating new, more democratic and balanced structures of exchange—even if Baltic connections evolved differently than during the Soviet period. The clearest articulation of this “othering” of Latvians and Lithuanians at the exhibition is found in an interview with Toivo Raidmets conducted in 2024, where he remarked: “Latvians and Lithuanians were no longer interesting to us.” The forced groupings had generated a sense of ennui that proved difficult to overcome in the post-Soviet period. However, it is worth noting that some of the works created at the *Neon* symposium, as well as those shown at the Tallinn exhibition, were later presented at one of the major international exhibitions of that period: the travelling Baltic-Scandinavian design exhibition *From Dreams to Reality: Baltic / Scandinavian Design and Craft Exhibition*, which toured Tallinn, Vilnius, Riga, Gothenburg, and Helsinki in 1993–1994. As one of the main organisers of this initiative, the architect of travelling exhibitions Jüri Kermik, has stated, “the exhibition project represented a strategic cultural political step of design diplomacy—with the ultimate aim of breaking through the isolating barrier of the Soviet system.”⁶³

Received — 27 11 2025

Acknowledgements

This research forms part of the project *Creative Interdisciplinary New European Bauhaus – NEB Research Centre*, funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT) under Grant Agreement No. S-A-UEI-23-3.

Bibliography

- Atkinson, Harriet. "‘Lines of Becoming’: Mi-sha Black and Entanglements through Exhibition Design." *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 1 (2020): 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa046>.
- Česokaite, Deimantė. "Meninio dizaino raiška ir kontekstai XX a. 9 dešimtmetyje: Lietuvos ir Estijos atvejų palyginamasis tyrimas." MA Thesis, Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2023.
- Cheang, Sarah, Katie Irani, Livia Rezende, and Shehnaz Suterwalla. "In Between Breaths: Memories, Stories, and Otherwise Design Histories." *Journal of Design History* 36, no. 2 (2023): 175–96. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epac038>.
- Halicka, Beata. "National or Multicultural? A Common Narrative about History in the Baltic States after 1991." *Social Sciences* 12, no. 8 (2013): 439–55. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12080439>.
- Helme, Sirje. *Lost Eighties: Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art on 1980s*. Center for Contemporary Arts, 2010.
- Jablonskienė, Lolita. "Lietuvos dizaino istorijos kuravimas." *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 107 (2022): 57–81. <https://doi.org/10.37522/aaav.107.2022.135>.
- Jakaitė, Karolina. "Design Connections between Lithuania and Estonia: Exhibitions, Contexts and the Brightest Creative Sparks." In *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, edited by Jüri Kermik. Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018.
- Jerlei, Triin. "And We Had to Do Better Than Abroad: The Local Vilnius Branch of VNIITE, All-Union Research Institute of Industrial Design, in Soviet Lithuania." *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* 103 (2021): 149–88. <https://doi.org/10.37522/aaav.103.2021.84>.
- Kagovere, Ott. "Pirangud on disaineri parimad abimehed. Intervjuu Linda van Deurseniga." *Müürileht*, December 23, 2024.
- Kermik, Jüri, ed. *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*. Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018.
- Kodres, Krista. "Toivo Raidmetsa provokatiivne esteetika." In *Raidmets*, edited by Toivo Raidmets. Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2011.
- Kodres, Krista. "Unistus paremast." *Sirp ja Vasar*, January 26, 1990.
- Kudarauskas, Vytautas. "Miesto vaizdai naktį ir dieną, arba mintys po dizainerių simpoziumo." *Tarybinė Klaipėda*, July 24, 1988.
- Lobjakas, Kai. *Bruno Tomberg: disaini leiutamine / Invention of Design*. Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2025.
- Natalevičienė, Lijana. "Giving Sense to Identity: The Role Of Ethnic Design In State Ideology." *Leida* 5 (2024). <https://leida.artun.ee/en/issues/stubborn-compromises-in-production/giving-sense-to-identity-the-role-of-ethnic-design-in-state-ideology>.
- Nõmberg, Ebe, and Krista Kodres. "Ruum ja Vorm V: 1." Estonian National Television. Tallinn, January 6, 1990. 25 min 51 sec. <https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ruum-ja-vorm-v-1>.
- Nõmberg, Ebe, and Krista Kodres. "Ruum ja Vorm V: 2." Estonian National Television. Tallinn, March 21, 1990. 18 min 43 sec. <https://arhiiv.err.ee/video/vaata/ruum-ja-vorm-v-2>.
- Ojari, Triin. "Divergences in Interior Design: Interior Design Awards." In *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, edited by Jüri Kermik. Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018.
- Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*. London: Reaktion Books, 2009.

- “Ruum ja Vorm 5.” *Kunst ja Kodu* 32 (1990).
- Trilupaitytė, Skaidra. *Lietuvos dailės gyvenimas ir institucijų kaita: sovietmečio pabaiga – Nepriklausomybės pradžia*. Vilnius: Artseria, 2017.
- Vahtre, Silver. “Discovery and Staging of the Environment. On Urban Space, the Environment and Photographic Posters in the 1980s. A Witness Account.” In *New Pain. Young Estonian Design in the 1980s*, edited by Jüri Kermik. Tallinn: Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design, 2018.
- “Vozvrashchenie neona.” *Reklama*, no. 6 (1989): 5–7.
- Willcocks, Judy. “Archives, Collections and Curatorship: Live Archive Projects in a Design History Learning Setting.” *Journal of Design History* 34, no. 2 (2021): 166–77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epaa047>.

Santrauka

Spontaniški Baltijos šalių dizainerių susitikimai parodose XX a. 9–10 deš. sandūroje: performatyvumo sampratos ir eksperimentinių dizaino praktikų transformacijos

Karolina Jakaitė, Triin Jerlei

Reikšminiai žodžiai: postmodernizmas, neonas, interjero dizainas, plakatų dizainas, eksperimentinis dizainas, *artdizainas*.

Straipsnyje analizuojamos dvi dizaino parodos, vykusios lūžio periodu – XX a. 9 deš. pabaigoje. Tai 1988 m. Klaipėdoje surengta *artdizaino* paroda *Neon–88* ir *Erdvė ir forma V (Ruum ja Vorm V)*, vykusi Taline 1989–1990 m. Nors abi parodos surengtos panašiu laikotarpiu ir jose dalyvavo dizaineriai iš visų trijų Baltijos šalių, jų organizacinės struktūros, dalyvių sudėtis ir eksponatai iš esmės skyrėsi. Abiejų parodų sąsajas atskleidžia dviejų latvių dizainerių – Uģio Piešinio (g. 1958) ir Vario Dzērvės (g. 1961) – dalyvavimas ir lietuvių dizaino tyrėjos Laimos Cieškaitės-Brėdikienės (1936–2012), mačiusios abi parodas, liudijimai.

Neon–88 buvo naujo tipo paroda, kurią finansavo dar sovietinės sistemos institucijos, tačiau pati iniciatyva kilo „iš apačios“ ir buvo įgyvendinta jaunųjų dizainerių pastangomis. Tuo tarpu Estijos meno fondo organizuota *Erdvė ir forma V* turėjo ilgametės tradicijas, tik penktą kartą surengta paroda jau atspindėjo bandymą pertvarkyti esamas struktūras.

Lygindamos abi parodas, straipsnio autorės remiasi interviu metodu, padedančiu rekonstruoti vizualinius naratyvus, parodų dalyvių sudėtį, organizacines aplinkybes ir menines praktikas. Analizė grindžiama dalyvių prisiminimų rekonstrukcijomis, kurios vertinamos kritiškai ir interpretuojamos iš šiuolaikinės perspektyvos. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami atskirų Baltijos šalių dizainerių ir institucijų tarpusavio ryšiai, susiformavę šių dviejų parodų kontekste, siekiant išsiaiškinti kintančias „Baltijos dizaino“ sampratas. Spontaniškumas, kaip abi parodas jungiantis organizacinis ir vadybinis principas, ne kartą išryškėjo interviu metu. Straipsnio teorinis diskursas paremtas ir Lietuvos meninį gyvenimą sovietmečio pabaigoje bei Nepriklausomybės pradžioje

tyrinėjusios Skaidros Trilupaitytės įžvalgomis apie „pakilumą“ ir „spontanišką pasiryžimą“. Tuo tarpu performatyvumo bei eksperimentiškumo aspektai išryškėjo analizuojant dizaino kūrinius ir tyrimo metu atrastas fotografijas.

Vertinant šių parodų reikšmę, galima teigti, kad *Neono* simpoziumas buvo lokalesnio pobūdžio projektas, likęs vienkartinio įvykiu. Vis dėlto platesniame istoriniame kontekste jis atskleidė svarbius Lietuvos dizaino lauko pokyčius. Tai liudija kuratorės L. Cieškaitės-Brėdikienės vaidmuo, *artdizaino* objektų dominavimas funkcinio ir industrinio dizaino atžvilgiu bei performatyvumo raiška, ypač išryškėjusi kuriant parodos plakata. Abi parodos vienija orientacija į eksperimentines menines praktikas. Daugelį jų eksponatų būtų galima laikyti meno objektais. Panašiai ir su jų dalyviais: dalis save siejo ne vien su dizaino sritimi, bet apibrėžė save kaip menininkus, architektus ar interjero dizainerius.

Talino paroda *Erdvė ir forma V* pirmą kartą tapo tarptautine, nes, be lietuvių, latvių ir estų, buvo pakviesti ir suomių dizaineriai. Nors abi parodos vyko permainų laikotarpiu ir tiesioginių politinių nuorodų aptinkama nedaug, vis dėlto galima įžvelgti tam tikrą kritiškumą bei išsilaisvinimo iš buvusios okupacinės sistemos ženklus. Aptariamoms parodoms atskleidžia naujas tendencijas, rodančias, kaip dizaineriai ir dizaino praktikos reagavo į poreikį iš naujo apibrėžti savo tapatybę, įsitvirtinti besikeičiančiame kultūriniame lauke ir įveikti sovietinės sistemos nulemtą izoliaciją.