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BALTIC ART HISTORIES: roles, references, relations

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Vilnius
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Latvian Society
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What is singular and what is plural in Baltic art histories? Which questions are raised and how are they solved by art historians? What kind of re- and pre-ferences do art histories make? What are the roles that art histories assume in inter- and cross-disciplinary projects, networks, and everyday realities? What voices do Baltic art histories have locally, regionally, and globally? (Or are they reserved to observing and listening?) How do art histories respond to or shape research policies? What are professional and civic priorities of art historians? These and similar questions usually addressed during breaks of scholarly conferences and sometimes noted in assessment drafts, call for in-depth discussion with an aim at identifying disciplinary roles, bonds, outputs, challenges, expectations, and potentials. Taking this inside-out format, the conference focuses on Baltic art histories as practised and reflected by art historians.

ABSTRACTS

I. Messages, measures, media

Agnė Narušytė (Vilnius Academy of Arts), Art Historian as a Cultural Whistleblower: Collaborations, Interventions and Media Presence

It is difficult to imagine an art historian working with contemporary art today as a detached observer whose role is only to study art objectively and convey her findings in the written and oral form. For a start, writing about contemporary artists who themselves are often excellent writers means engaging with them in interdisciplinary dialogues and even co-writing and co-creating art events that offer theoretical or political instruments to interpret the world. Moreover, the current global landscape – the crumbling world order, climate change, or various socio-political upheavals – draws art historians into a whirlpool of events and compels them to assume unexpected roles that extend beyond traditional academia. Those roles include critiquing the declining quality of new public art resulting from the declining prestige of art history, challenging popular narratives of visual culture that show contempt towards human rights, or curating events that challenge established views on culture and politics. To demonstrate how these roles are fulfilled and how they might affect the public discourse, I shall examine works by Lithuanian art historians as well as my own experiences, which include the hopelessly lost war over public art, post-curatorial feminist interventions, and creative collaborations with artists.

Katrin Kivimaa (Estonian Academy of Arts), Looking Back: Thirty Years of Estonian Feminist Art History

Transnational networks and personal connections, whether based on shared ideas, professional interests, or friendship, have played a significant role in advancing feminist research in Baltic art histories. The global feminist art history project, originating in the 1970s, has been shaped not only by academic or institutionalized art-world contexts but also by the shared political commitments and interests of women. This common political foundation of feminism has facilitated international and transnational cooperation among art historians working in, and with, vastly different cultural contexts. Ideas and various formats for feminist intervention have circulated and transformed to generate new knowledge and cultural changes in different societies.

Responding to some of the questions proposed by the conference, in my presentation, I will reflect on both the professional and social roles of art history as practiced by feminist art historians, focusing primarily on examples from Estonian art history. I will explore interactions, influences, and the transmission of knowledge through transnational channels of communication. Although these routes may have initially been one-way streets, they have evolved into multidirectional exchanges. While global power relations inevitably influence transnational feminist networks, the voices of Baltic feminist art histories have resonated far beyond the region.

Aiga Dzalbe (Art Academy of Latvia), Culture Magazines as a Source of Art History: Editorial Choices and Politics in Latvia

The critique of visual arts in Latvia faces challenges due to multiple global and local factors. While professional reflections occur, commentary on local art life remains fragmented and chaotic. Several outlets, including two daily newspaper supplements, three cultural portals, specialized magazines, radio shows, and podcasts, offer regular professional coverage of visual arts. However, many events, particularly those involving specific art media, lack analytical evaluation. The proliferation of internet technology has fostered a misconception that everything is archived, leading to a decreased emphasis on purposeful selection and archiving of art events over the past decades.

This lack of systematic archiving has resulted in “blank spots” in future art history chronicles, fragmenting the chronicle of visual arts and hindering credible interpretation by future historians. Nevertheless, understanding past narratives is crucial for a society that identifies itself as a united memory community.

What later becomes perceived as canon often emerges under ambiguous circumstances. Art critique plays a significant role in determining what enters historical narratives, shaping the order and hierarchy of the most notable phenomena. The editorial challenge lies in deciding which phenomena to emphasize and which to overlook. This presentation delves into the choices made by Latvian cultural media and their portrayal of surrounding art movements, exploring their influence on public perceptions and art history. A comparative analysis spanning three periods – the interwar period, the Soviet era, and the present day – will be provided. Through examination of specific examples, the presentation aims to elucidate how opinions expressed in publications during each period contribute to, or potentially neglect, the shaping of Latvian Art History.

II. Revisions, reflections, retrospect

Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece (Latvian National Museum of Art / Art Academy of Latvia), What is So Wild Here? Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States (2018–2021): Project Evaluation and Resonance

The project *Wild Souls. Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States* was initially conceived to be held in Paris in 2018. Thanks to the support of Laurence des Cars, President of Musée d'Orsay, the dream of showcasing the exhibition in one of the world's top museums became a reality. Musée d'Orsay offered its most prestigious hall for the exhibition, serving as both the venue and the main financial partner for the realization of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. The initiative of Baltic colleagues was to create a traveling exhibition with significance placed on its entire route, encompassing Tallinn (2018), Vilnius (2020), and Riga (2020–2021). Each museum from the neighbouring countries contributed their perspective and research efforts. While retaining the overall concept and making nuanced adjustments, each museum presented a unique narrative – Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian versions – of the Symbolism saga.

Each of the national art museums in the Baltic States had already conducted its own studies and activities related to this theme. The project, which initially began as an investigation into Symbolism, has emerged as a significant catalyst for cultural exchanges between the Baltic States and France. It stands as a testament to the success of the general curator, Rodolphe Rapetti (France), aided by the collaboration between Baltic National Art Museums. Particularly noteworthy was the creative preparatory stage of the exhibition, which led to many discoveries, along with scholarly conferences held in each of the countries during the project.

The primary objective of the work is to analyse the collective benefits that culminate in the final outcome. The paper will investigate the established research platform in the Baltic countries, along with parallel publications and activities in France. Additionally, it will assess the resonance of the ideas generated as a result of this collaboration, considering the passage of time.

Given that the mentioned project led to the establishment of the Baltic Culture Foundation, it becomes crucial to address and resolve the question: What roles does art history play in cross- and interdisciplinary projects, networks, and everyday realities? At what point do existing connections evolve into a new level of quality? When does Baltic art history emerge as a culmination of research? Moreover, is an external perspective necessary as a catalyst to achieve the standard of excellence in new joint Baltic projects?

Kädi Talvoja (Estonian Academy of Arts), National Art Schools or Stereotypes? Reviews on Baltic Art in the Vilnius Painting Triennials, 1969–1987

The paper explores the representation of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian national art schools in reviews of the Vilnius Painting Triennials during the Soviet era. Covering seven triennials spanning from 1969 to 1987, the study tracks potential changes or continuities in the perception of art schools, including the vocabulary of critics, methods of interpretation, and value orientations. The analysis draws from a dossier of newspaper and journal articles published in Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian media.

Critiques of the triennials acknowledge that the model of nationality found its most natural expression in Lithuanian painting, which valued the stylistic elements that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s: painterliness, expressiveness of brushwork, and the power of colour expression.

Conversely, the signs of nationality in Estonian painting, emphasizing impulses from Western art, and the diverse artistic styles associated with Latvian art appeared more unusual – at least in retrospect.

While there were undoubtedly distinguishing and contrasting features in the art of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the 1970s and 1980s, the paper argues that the strong emergence of the motif of stylistic schools was not solely due to the exhibited art but largely stemmed from the methods of art criticism at the time. Nevertheless, schools were prominent in criticism and in the value orientations that depicted each republic's art in a more favourable light.

Ramutė Rachlevičiūtė (Vilnius Academy of Arts), Were the 1960s and 1970s Truly the Golden Age of Lithuanian Painting?

In the history of Lithuanian art, it has been argued that the mid-1970s to the first half of the 1980s constituted the Golden Age of Lithuanian painting, a period often judged by the history of official exhibitions. The Vilnius Painting Triennials (established in 1969) played a crucial role in forming a canon for painting in the three Baltic countries. This canon distinguished the contemporary photorealist Estonian painting and the gestural expressionist Lithuanian painting, while Latvian painting is harder to categorize, falling somewhere between the Estonian and Lithuanian styles. Lithuanian painting's pre-eminence in the Baltic States was underlined by Lithuania hosting the painting triennials, while Estonia, the unrivalled capital of modern printmaking, held print triennials, and Latvia, the leader in sculpture, organized the Baltic Sculpture Quadrennials.

Soviet art critics had mixed responses to Lithuanian painting, critiquing it as sketchy, too spontaneous, poorly drawn and composed yet admiring its expressionistic modernity. Baltic paintings from the Soviet era were included in major foreign collections such as the Norton Dodge Collection in the USA and the Ludwig Collection in Germany. Who bought the works of which artists in Soviet-era Lithuania, and what is the fate of these works? How is their dissemination occurring? The Baltic works in the Norton Dodge collection have been included in a comprehensive publication edited by art historians from Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, seemingly securing their place in art history. However, a review of the albums and catalogues published by the Ludwig Museum reveals a gradual disappearance of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian artworks from the second half of the 20th century. These works are becoming increasingly less interesting to specialists, curators, and compilers.

Recent exhibitions in the Baltic States indicate that marginal and previously unimportant artists are increasingly being included in the history of art exhibitions and attracting the interest of local curators. But can these artists find a place in the international art history of the second half of the 20th century? And more importantly, can they maintain their presence there? This raises the question: Were the 1960s and 1970s Truly the Golden Age of Lithuanian Painting?

III. Consolidations, colonies, concepts

Kristina Jõekalda (Estonian Academy of Arts), The Propagandist *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung* and the Continuing Afterlives of World War I

Despite its vast scale and highly political content, not to mention its cross-Baltic plus German dimension and relevance, the travelling *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung* of 1918 has surprisingly earned little attention in existing scholarship, even less than the *Kurland-Ausstellung* of 1917. Could this be due to its politicized nature? Precisely this aspect makes it particularly interesting from today's

perspective. The exhibition serves as a textbook example of the colonial instrumentalization of history to justify plans for territorial expansion, skilfully combining the aims of Germans and Baltic Germans during the turmoil of the final years of World War I. Who were the stakeholders behind this undertaking? What were the results of the exhibition, both in terms of contemporary reception and media coverage, as well as the later reception of the exhibition and its related special publications? What became of the hundreds of artefacts transported to Germany in the midst of the ongoing war? How was this undertaking interpreted in various circles in both Germany and the Baltic region? More importantly, how has it been covered in later historiography, both in art history and other fields? My paper will explore the broader cultural significance of the *Livland-Estland-Ausstellung*, its aftereffects during the interwar era, and its position in Estonian and Latvian historiography, drawing on new findings from Estonian and German archives.

Karina Simonson (Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Vilnius University), The Baltic Republics and the Global South: The Challenges of “Friendship of Peoples” in Soviet Children’s Media

The presentation aims to reveal the representations of African and Asian countries’ history, culture, and people, and manifestations of the Soviet concept of the “friendship of peoples” with Africa and Asia as depicted in Soviet Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian children’s media. It contextualizes these representations within the broader research on children’s literature, theatre, and film, linking them with Soviet ideology and geopolitical interests. The research is developed at the intersection of ideologized Soviet children’s culture and postcolonial theory.

The presentation raises pivotal questions: What were the prevailing images of Africa and Asia propagated through the visual culture of the period? How were these themes depicted in children’s periodicals, their motifs, and iconography? And how were the Soviet politics of friendship with Africa and Asia articulated and conveyed to Baltic children during the Soviet era?

The presentation delves into the Soviet use of Africa and Asia-themed illustrations to project Soviet foreign policy as progressive and anti-colonial, positioning antiracism and anticolonialism as central pillars of its Cold War stance against the West.

The presentation methodology unfolds in several stages: Firstly, the concept itself is unpacked, elucidating its historical, political, and cultural contexts. Secondly, the case study of Lithuania explores direct interactions between Lithuanians and individuals from Africa and Asia during the Soviet era. Thirdly, diverse types and modes of representation of Africa and Asia are scrutinized. Finally, attention is directed towards tropes and stereotypes evident in selected illustrations.

Ieva Astahovska (Art Academy of Latvia), Decoloniality and Art Historical Alliances in the Baltics

In my paper, I will explore the influence of postcolonial and decolonial perspectives on the writing of art history in the Baltics, as well as their role in fostering cooperation and solidarity in the region. While these discourses were previously underrepresented in the field of art and art history in the Baltics, – unlike, for example, in literary studies, – recent events such as Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine have brought them to the forefront of regional cultural and art discourse. I aim to investigate how these perspectives are challenging existing knowledge and developing new or alternative viewpoints in the field of art and its heritage in the region. This includes addressing theoretical

questions related to the complex political-historical and artistic contexts of the Baltics, as well as the responsibility to avoid oversimplification and bring a new reflexive turn to art history in the region. One crucial aspect of these perspectives is their confrontation with the entrenched and hegemonic model of centre and periphery, which imbues the debate on horizontal art history and its possible methods with significant political implications. By revisiting avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art developments of the 20th century, I will examine how these movements can be linked to multiple art centres rather than individual metropolises, challenging traditional narratives of artistic hierarchy.

IV. Heritage Heard

Laura Lūse (Rundale Palace Museum), Fine Diplomacy in the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of Mežotne Palace

The task of art historians and architectural researchers is closely linked to the art of persuasion. The way we discuss art or cultural heritage is intertwined with the political positions of our countries. Professionals often believe that stating a “universal truth” will suffice for society and decision-making bodies to understand and support it. However, we frequently need to engage in systematic explanatory work to convince those not involved in our field of its importance. This is particularly evident in the field of cultural heritage, especially when the heritage of the Baltic nobility is under discussion. Even excellent objects are not immune to ideological contradictions. Using Mežotne Palace as an example, I will illustrate its interpretations across different time periods. The manor complex, with its palace and English park, was once the pride of the Lieven family, later became an agrarian resource for the Latvian state, and was subsequently regarded as an object of great significance worthy of restoration and preservation, before eventually being viewed as a burden on the state lacking purpose. At this juncture, persuasion by professionals and societal pressure play a crucial role in determining the future of Mežotne Palace.

Aistė Bimbirytė (Lithuanian National Museum of Art / Vilnius Academy of Arts), Theory in Practice – The Lithuanian Manors Summer School

This presentation aims to introduce the Lithuanian Manors Summer School project, organized by the Lithuanian Society of Art Historians, and to review the emerging patterns observed over its four years of existence. The project drew inspiration from the Attingham Trust Summer School, a longstanding tradition in Great Britain where heritage specialists from around the world explore British manors, attend lectures, and engage with preserved artifacts for several weeks. There was no doubt that such courses were needed in Lithuania. The inception of the Lithuanian Manors Summer School was prompted by several highly publicized cases of mismanagement at heritage sites in Lithuania, highlighting a clear need for improved communication among owners, specialists, and institutions. Consequently, the creation of an informal space for these groups to convene and foster mutual understanding became imperative. Manors were deemed an ideal setting for this endeavour, particularly as art historians had begun to show heightened interest in the field in recent years. However, the project also presented challenges, particularly in persuading private property owners to welcome a large group of art historians, restorers, architects, and heritage conservationists onto their estates. Nevertheless, the outcomes speak for themselves – the courses have become a recurring event, with selected students and property owners spending a week touring Lithuanian manors each

year. Notably, some property owners have even pursued and successfully completed studies in art history as a result of their involvement.

V. Profession, principles, practices

Silvija Grosa (Art Academy of Latvia), Research on Riga's Art Nouveau Architecture in the 21st Century: Prospects and Interpretations

Riga's Art Nouveau architecture has been extensively explored in Latvia's art history literature. A certain canon emerged in the interpretation of this subject due to the research, publications, and authority of Jānis Krastiņš by the late 20th century. However, the early 21st century has introduced new aspects and additions in terms of terminology, contextual understanding, factual material, and interpretation.

In recent years, the digitalization of periodicals by the National Library of Latvia has significantly expanded the factual knowledge available. Press information has been notably enriched by archival studies, including research by young art historians. Contributions from scholars not only in Latvia but also from Lithuania (Dalia Klajumienė), Estonia (Karin Hallas), and the United Kingdom (Jeremy Howard) have greatly enhanced this field. The perspective of Eduards Kļaviņš serves as an intriguing and complementary element in the interpretation of Riga's Art Nouveau architecture. However, alongside serious studies and publications on Riga's Art Nouveau architecture, a problem has emerged in the recent years: the rise of pseudo art history, which raises questions about so-called academic dilettantism in art history as a whole.

Kristiāna Ābele (Art Academy of Latvia), Book Reviews in the Contemporary Discourse of Art History in Latvia: Wistful National Phoenix Dreams of a Globally Endangered Species

In line with the focus "on Baltic art histories as practised and reflected by art historians," I suggest examining the contemporary scene in our discipline from the perspective of book reviews. This form of scholarly criticism is diminishing across the humanities, with informal interdisciplinary exchanges often lamenting its feeble condition or even its potential extinction after a period of precarious existence. Both scholarly journals and cultural magazines are reducing the space afforded to this endangered species. Published reviews are becoming increasingly rare compared to the frequency of new book releases and the ceaseless multiplication of the constituent "critical discussion" within various contexts of academic communication.

Sharing observations about the entanglements of causes that may have led to the present situation, and inviting analysis as symptomatic of controversial developments, I am also glad to hear the slow and weak breathing of this endangered specimen in Latvia. Although insufficient for great activity, it remains noticeable here and there – from a permanent place in the review section of the academic journal *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija* (started in 2003 by Elita Grosmane) to an unexpected shelter in the Roman Catholic magazine *Katoļu Baznīcas Vēstnesis*, where Pēteris Bankovskis, a veteran of Latvian cultural journalism and insatiable reader, publishes a monthly essay about a new title from the national book production in the humanities.

Since 2012, the M.A. curriculum at the Art History Department of the Art Academy of Latvia includes a course on art history text analysis, with a book review as the final assignment to be presented and discussed in special readings. By 2024, a small number (fourteen) of these reviews

have been subsequently published in *Mākslas Vēsture un Teorija* or other media. Working with students in this course provides me with a continuous standpoint for monitoring the changing scene and reflecting on the role of the book review not only as a longed-for sign of appreciation in the professional community but also as an important element of the art historical discourse.

Johannes Saar (Estonian Academy of Arts), Estonian Vernacular Artist Novels: Revising Art Historical Narratives

In this presentation, I will analyze the narrative strategies and gender stereotypes found in vernacular Estonian artist novels, shedding light on their implications for larger art historical narratives. The genre of art historical fiction in Estonian literature showcases a rich intertextual blend of Christian moral literature, melodrama, and biblical passion stories, all within the overarching framework of the male-centric art historical canon, which is the focal point of my presentation.

Due to time constraints, I will focus on a few recurring historiographical patterns. Firstly, Estonian artist novels often compress artists' biographies into belletristic prose, particularly when it offers an opportunity to subtly introduce modernized shadow figures of the Redeemer archetype. These novels typically feature a protagonist who is a heroic outsider on the fringes of the art world, struggling for recognition and a place in history – a narrative structure reminiscent of New Testament-like passion stories. Secondly, underlying misogyny permeates these narratives of male martyrdom, with female characters relegated to subordinate roles that emphasize men's genius and power, if they appear at all. Female characters are often depicted engaging in stereotypical behaviours such as sighing, chattering, prattling, and scolding, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Moreover, their presence in the novels is frequently reduced to their physically vulnerable and intellectually challenged bodies, portrayed as easily influenced and passive objects for male exploitation.

VI. Masses, means, masters

Rasa Dargužaitė (Lithuanian Culture Research Institute), Art Production Factories: The Case of Art Production in the Baltic Republics During the Soviet Period

During the Soviet period, production associations in various industries (textiles, food, furniture, etc.) called *kombinat* were established and operated throughout the Soviet Union. The so-called art factories, founded on the same principle, were known as art production factories: *kombinatas "Dailė"* in Lithuanian, *kombināts "Māksla"* in Latvian, and *kombinaat "Ars"* in Estonian. These art production factories encompassed all areas of professional and folk art, controlling and coordinating their activities. They undertook projects for decorating urban environments, designing festive events, exhibitions, and museum expositions, and creating interiors and exteriors of public buildings. Additionally, they produced decorative and utilitarian items known as industrial art. Examining the principles of production in these factories reveals that the creation of works of art and design paralleled that of other industries. This paper discusses the activities of the art production factories in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia during the Soviet period, focusing on the circumstances of their emergence and their structure. It aims to highlight local specifics, similarities, and differences: the types of workshops that operated within the art production factories, the factors influencing their establishment, and the typical examples of circulating production, along with their specifics and

design. The paper emphasizes that the operations of the art production factories were inseparable from the political and economic context of the Soviet regime.

Triin Reidla (Estonian Academy of Arts), Exhibition as an Art Historical Tool: "Bold and Beautiful: Estonian Private Houses from the 1980s"

Alongside traditional academic research, the doctoral program at Estonian Academy of Arts sees a notable emergence of creative research. It has become customary that an exhibition presented before reviewers is equivalent to a 1.1 scholarly article. In spring 2024, my creative research exhibition "Bold and Beautiful: Estonian Private Houses from the 1980s" was reviewed; thus becoming the first reviewed exhibition in curricula of the PhD programme in cultural heritage.

My doctoral research focuses on the history and evaluation of the heritage of postmodernist private houses in Estonia of the 1980s. As these houses are inherently private, they are difficult to protect as heritage and not easily accessible to research. Moreover, a significant amount of information comes from oral sources, including memories of builders, owners and architects. Written sources such as archival materials may not provide a comprehensive architectural historical overview.

The conference paper focuses on two topics. Firstly, it addresses challenges of researching the architectural history of private houses of 1980s. Secondly, it analysis whether and how the exhibition format could support the research into architectural history and offer new perspectives. The presentation will emphasise the exhibition as a tool that can:

- critically analyse existing knowledge of architectural history;
- communicate multifaced heritage to a broader audience;
- influence changes in heritage evaluation;
- find contacts that other research methods might not achieve;
- receive immediate feedback on the research (curator tours and surveys);
- use exhibition communication plans to present new ideas about research topics.

Karolina Jakaitė (Vilnius Academy of Arts) and Triin Jerlei (Estonian Academy of Arts / Vilnius Academy of Arts), Relations Between Lithuanian and Estonian Designers in the Late 1980s – Early 1990s

The presentation is part of the joint research project "Baltic Way: Design Histories from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the Late 1980s–1990s," launched this year under the New European Bauhaus initiative. We will focus on the relationships between Baltic designers during an understudied period of significant change and transition – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent Baltic republics. While the emerging design economies of this era have often been studied in terms of their dependence on Western Europe, this presentation explores the connections between two Baltic countries that maintained a close relationship during Soviet occupation: Estonia and Lithuania. To what extent did the designers of these newly independent states collaborate in establishing new organizations and structures? Did the contacts forged under the totalitarian regime endure? And what local and international processes influenced these peripheral relationships?