

(Un)Blocked Memory. Writing Art History in the Baltic Countries

2nd conference of Baltic art historians. Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, 14th–15th October 2011*

Review by Kristina Jōekalda

The tradition of joint conferences of Baltic art historians dates back to the late 1950s, but was disrupted in the early 1990s. Since the conference on the 'geographies' of the region's art histories was held in Tallinn two years ago¹ it seems to have undergone a resurrection. Responding to the shifts occurring within the discipline itself during the decades in between, the conferences – which are now held in English as opposed to the former 'uniting' language Russian – have set themselves broader and more general aims. Hence both the Tallinn and the Kaunas conference reviewed here have concentrated on issues of historiography. This year's meeting was organised by the *Vytautas Magnus University* (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas)² together with the *Vilnius Academy of Arts* (Vilniaus Dailės Akademija) and Linara Dovydaitytė as the convenor.

The topic of the conference was the selectivity of writing art history, the issue of remembering and (deliberate) forgetting, the blocking of memories, interpretations etc. as a result of wider social processes, such as political conditions and nationalist endeavours – in other words, neg(oti)ating conflicting pasts.

The event was divided into six sessions (see conference schedule below), the common denominators of which were questions of constructing and interpreting art history and its narratives. The participants of the sessions were grouped so as to avoid separate panels for any one country or period, yet on a more conceptual level the reasoning behind these groupings was at times difficult to grasp.

Whereas the previous Tallinn conference also included questions of Finnish art historiography, this time the Baltic region was defined in a narrower sense, indicating exclusively the three Baltic states.

The relationship between the (late) Soviet period and the regained independence of the early 1990s in which Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia share many common experiences was brought up in various cases and forms. With hindsight it becomes obvious that it was the presentation and subject matter of AGNĖ NARUŠYTĖ (Vilnius) that provided either conceptual or immediate links with most of the papers dealing with the latter half of the 20th century. Therefore I shall take these as my starting point. Narušytė herself spoke about photography as a mnemonic tool in depictions of daily life during the period of transition in Lithuania – from the 1980s up to the present. According to her, ostensibly ordinary snapshots of the Soviet world could easily obtain a hidden message or an ironic connotation – sometimes by accident or coincidence, frequently only from temporal distance. She brought up the example of photographs of crowds made by Zinas Kazėnas during the national reawakening movement which were to become iconic later on, not least because of the specific way in which they (unintentionally) render seemingly typical scenes as suitable for the new national narrative. Although they might be interpreted as photographic reconstructions of memory, the boundary between documentary and artistic photography becomes rather vague in the case of images so well known and emblematic.

Images of the removal of Soviet monuments also mentioned by Narušytė nicely tallied with the presentation by MAIJA RUDOVSKA (Rīga) who addressed the remembering and forgetting of architectural monuments through the ambivalent aesthetic similarities between Latvian inter-war neoclassicism and Soviet-era Stalinism.

Another intriguing aspect of Narušytė's paper was the problem of the remnants of Soviet reality in contemporary settings as a sort of counter-memory. RENATA ŠUKAITYTĖ (Vilnius) dealt with similar issues by reflecting on the films by Šarūnas Bartas. In his films Bartas often depicts small communities, deserted and neglected locations, despair and stagnation, taking a passive and observing position. In doing so, his aim seems to be keeping or even restoring the memory of the (mental) violence etc. of the Soviet regime. During the discussion, many participants agreed that most post-Soviet nations are sadly still fixed on a certain self-victimisation. Also Bartas's films might be seen as illustrating the continuous tendency to (re)define past events as traumatic, but at the same time his films gain a more universal character when interpreted as conveying a general nostalgia for a lost world.

Narušytė concluded that after the collapse of the Soviet Union it has been extremely difficult to take photographs with any similar metaphoric and metaphoric or symbolic power. She defined this as the primary reason why many post-Soviet authors – not only photographers and not only Lithuanians – have turned to the (n)ostalgic but also 'traumatic' past and its devastating consequences.

Several papers analysed the recent conceptual shifts in researching (post-)Soviet art. I especially enjoyed the presentation by LINARA DOVYDAITYTĖ (Kaunas) who discussed the advantages and disadvantages of adapting post-colonial theories to the field of Soviet studies. She aimed to open up alternatives to the traditional approach applied to Soviet art since the 1990s – the lens of 'official' art paralleling with resistant dissidence and non-conformism – which is clearly unable to describe the ambivalent situation in which both sides mutually affected one another. Similar to the situation in Estonia, Dovydaitytė characterised post-colonial studies as still forming a niche methodology in Lithuania, mostly exploited in literary studies.³

Another interesting reinterpretation was presented by ANU ALLAS (Berlin). The starting point for her was the local art historians' alleged wide-spread belief that Estonian art of the 1980s was something boring. Indeed, its visionary, ripe symbolism on the one hand and its extreme traditionalism on the other do not

seem to have correlated with actual contemporary social processes. The 1980s have thus been dubbed as a 'lost decade'⁴ discontinuous with the previous as well as the following one. Allas saw such labelling as partly caused by the fact that most researchers writing on this period are still affected by their intimate perspective and personal memories.

To date there have been few thorough analyses of the cultural relations, institutional similarities or differences between the periods following the declaration of independence of any of the three Baltic states after the First World War and its restoration in the 1990s. Therefore the paper by GINTA GERHARDE-UPENIECE (Rīga) seemed promising as it considered such links in inter-war and post-Soviet Latvia. However it was difficult to agree with her suggestion that there was a complete collapse between these periods, an abyss that only collective memory was able to cross.

In several papers the myth-creating practices seemed to be taken for granted (curiously including those in the panel *(De)constructing the Canon*) and were merely complemented or reproduced. The descriptive overview of well-known artistic styles of the 1920s and their impact on Latvian painters by DACE LAMBERGA (Rīga) – who also provided a schematic insight into contemporary and later research on the so-called 'classical modernism' – gave occasion to heated discussions on the *Latvian Culture Canon* (*Latvijas Kulturas Kanons*) which has recently been compiled by leading Latvian cultural historians.⁵ Such simplifying overviews have naturally often been used for didactic purposes, but it was the uncritical appraisal of this venture that caught the attention of many participants from neighbouring states.

IVETA DERKUSOVA's (Rīga) paper on Gustav Klutšis (Gustavs Klucis), a pioneering photographer and member of the Russian avant-garde, dealt with the retrospective discovery of his art and the question as to whether a native Latvian who emigrated and became a distinguished artist elsewhere still forms part of the country's art history, in spite of his lack of contacts with the Latvian art scene. This prompted a discussion on *émigré* artists and the principles according to which they become integrated into national narrat-

ives. It was strongly questioned whether it was justified or even ethical to retrospectively include works made in exile – i.e. in a context that was completely different to that of his/her country of origin – into our national art histories, in particular if the ethnicity of the artist remains the only link.

Another perspective on the inter-war era was offered by KRISTA KODRES (Tallinn) who concentrated on the opposing concepts and narratives advanced in Estonian (including the professors of Swedish origin) and (Baltic) German art historical writings of the 1920s and 1930s. The rather aggressive efforts of the latter have attracted little attention thus far and have traditionally been left out of the local historiography.

SILVIJA GROSA (Rīga) and KRISTIĀNA ĀBELE (Rīga) similarly addressed long-forgotten questions of ethnic juxtapositions evident in national(ist) narratives. Grosa exposed the problem of the so-called National Romanticism in Latvian architecture, often seen as a self-expression of the Latvian nation. It was good to hear that, according to her, this myth is in need of revision. Ābele dealt with art of the turn of the 19th to the 20th century – apparently the best-researched and also most multi-cultural epoch in Latvian art history –, focusing on the question of the ethnicity of artists and its role in the cultural life of the time as well as in later narratives of art history.

In conclusion, the conference was very heterogeneous. In (too) many cases, the papers were only tangibly linked to the principal focus of the event, namely the (de)construction of memory and the competing as well as differing ideologies in writing art history, also in relation to myth-making and its criticism. Besides, the many intriguing and up-to-date approaches demonstrating the determination and capacity to rethink existing narratives alternated with surprisingly traditional papers, simply introducing visual material, lacking self-reflectivity and awareness of critical historiography – the central aims of the conference.

Nonetheless, important and necessary discussions on the most pressing issues did take place, justifying the need for such a conference. Especially Krista Kodres, Linara Dovydaitytė and Giedrė Mickūnaitė have to be recognised for their constant state

of alert, asking polemic, conceptualising, deservedly critical and sometimes irritating questions whenever possible – they formed indeed the conscience of the event and kept the essential debates going.

Conference Programme⁶

Opening address: Linara Dovydaitytė (Kaunas)

Session: (Re)Writing History. Ideologies and Interpretations (Moderator: Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, Rīga)

Giedrė Mickūnaitė (Vilnius): Past Things, Present Texts. Medieval Art and Its Histories

Aija Brasliņa (Rīga): Niklāvs Strunke in the Shifting Paradigms of Latvian Art and Art History

Anu Allas (Berlin): An Unexpected Loss. Writing Art History between Parentheses

Session: Rethinking the Discipline. Theories, Concepts, Methods (Moderator: Agnė Narušytė, Vilnius)

Linara Dovydaitytė (Kaunas): Art History and Post-Colonialism. A Lithuanian Case

Maija Rudovska (Rīga): Expired Monuments. Some Case Studies on Soviet-Era Architecture in Latvia

Maria-Kristiina Soomre (Tallinn): Art, Politics and Exhibitions. (Re)Writing the History of (Re)Presentations

Renata Šukaitytė (Vilnius): The Drift along a Traumatic Past in the Cinematic Worlds of Šarūnas Bartas

Session: (De)Constructing the Canon. Heroes, Myths, Alternative Stories (Moderator: Linara Dovydaitytė, Kaunas)

Dace Lamberga (Rīga): The History of Latvian Classical Modernism

Tomas Pabedinskas (Kaunas): Lithuanian School of Photography. The Birth of the Myth and Forgotten Alternatives

Session: Possessing the Past. Art History and Competing Discourses (Moderator: Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, Vilnius)

Krista Kodres (Tallinn): Who's Art History? Competing Art Historical Narratives in Estonia in 1930s and Their Afterlife

Kristiāna Ābele (Rīga): The Picture of the Period 1890–1915 in Latvian Art Historical Writing. Ethnocentric Distortions and Ways to Correct Them

Iveta Derkusova (Rīga): Interpretations of the Creative Work by Gustav Klucis (1895–1938) in Latvian Context and Beyond

Section: (Re)Constructions. Art as Mnemonic Practices (Moderator: Krista Kodres, Tallinn)

Agnė Narušytė (Vilnius): Lithuanian Photography. The History of the Present

Lina Preišegalavičienė (Kaunas): The Interaction of Memory and Interior in the Interwar Kaunas Living Space

Session: Facing Challenges. Global Culture and New National Narratives (Moderator: Kristiāna Ābele, Rīga)

Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece (Rīga): The Continuity Aspect of Latvian Cultural Policy (1918–1940) in the Early 21st Century

Silvija Grosa (Rīga): Rethinking National Romanticism in the Architecture of Riga at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries

Footnotes

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1. See: *Geographies of Art History in the Baltic Region. Internationale Konferenz*, Reval (Tallinn), 27.–28.11.2009, Bericht von Mari Laanemets, in: *kunsttexte.de/ostblick*, Nr. 1, 2010 (6 Seiten), www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick (accessed 25th Oct. 2011). A special issue on the 1st conference of Baltic art historians entitled *Geographies of Art History in the Baltic Region* was published subsequently: *Kunsteiaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture*, 19 (2010), no. 3–4.
2. I.e. the Faculty of Arts in cooperation with the Cluster of Research of Disintegration of Communism and Post-Communist Transformations.
3. She also drew attention to an example of a successful attempt of including art into the analysis of literature: Danas Lapkus, *Potek-sčių ribos. Uždraustos tapatybės devintojo dešimtmečio lietuvių prozoje* (Boundaries of the subtext. Forbidden identities in Lithuanian art and prose fiction of the 1980s), Chicago 2003.
4. See *Kadunud kaheksakümnendad. Probleemid, teemad ja tähendused 1980. aastate eesti kunstis / Lost eighties. Problems, themes and meanings in Estonian art of 1980s*, comp. by Sirje Helme, ed. by Andreas Trossek and Johannes Saar, Tallinn 2010.
5. See the *Latvian Cultural Canon* on the internet: <http://www.kulturaskanons.lv/en/1/> (accessed 20th Oct. 2011). See furthermore: Stella Peiše, *Creating the Discipline. Facts, Stories and Sources of Latvian Art History*, in: *Kunsteiaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture*, 19 (2010), no. 3–4, p. 39. For more critical approaches see: *Does Latvia Need its own Cultural Canon?*, in: *Dizaina Studija*, 15 (2008), no. 5, <http://www.dizainastudija.eu/index.php/en/0/2/188/307/308/index.html> (accessed 20th Oct. 2011).
6. The programme with abstracts is available online: http://www.-menufakultetas.vdu.lt/var/uploads/editor/konferencijos_knygele_ok.pdf (accessed 28th Oct. 2011).

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Titel

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