

Preface

In October 2011 Vytautas Magnus University and the Vilnius Academy of Arts held a conference, *(Un)blocked Memory: Writing Art History in Baltic Countries*. This event continued the series of conferences of Baltic art historians initiated by the Estonian Academy of Arts, together with the Estonian Society of Art Historians, in 2009.¹ Eighteen art historians from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania participated in the two-day meeting in Kaunas.

The participants in the conference were offered the opportunity to look at the research on the arts in the Baltic countries through the lens of the problem of memory. During the last several decades, art history has been seriously affected by the ideas of critical historiography; it has been influenced by such new disciplines as culture studies, memory studies, postcolonial studies etc., encouraging a critical rethinking of art history as an objective narrative about the past. In Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – countries that experienced Soviet occupation – this idea has not simply been borrowed from Western theories, but is based on actual historical experience. The rewriting of history, and the blocking and liberation of collective memory constantly accompanied changes in political regimes in the twentieth century. In the post-Soviet era, these processes have also affected art historical discourse, as well as curatorial and museum practices.

The participants in the conference discussed the history of art as a (re)construction of the past influenced by political, economic and ideological factors, and by collective imagination and memory. Among the discussed topics was the rethinking of the discipline by making use of new theories, methods and concepts, the creation of heroes and myths in art history, the struggle of opposite discourses in art history, and new challenges in writing a local art history in the global context. Some important topics of the conference were developed in the papers published in the current issue of the journal *Studies on Art and Architecture*.

Three of the texts are united by the aim of re-thinking the national canon of art history. The history of the Baltic countries is a blend of various nations and cultures, and in different periods some of them were dominant, and some were dominated. Thus it makes sense to analyse the circumstances of creating an art history based on nationality, to discuss its characteristic omissions and distortions, and to offer a new

¹ Selected papers from this conference were published in the special issue of *Studies on Art and Architecture* called 'The Geographies of Art History in the Baltic region' in 2010.

approach to the past as a complicated multicultural process. This issue is addressed in Kristiāna Ābele's article 'The Picture of the Period 1890–1915 in Latvian Art-Historical Writing: Ethnocentric Distortions and Ways to Correct them', Iveta Derkusova's article 'The Most Recognised Latvian [?] Artist in the World. The Case of Gustavs Klucis (1895–1938)', and in 'Rethinking National Romanticism in the Architecture of Riga at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', by Silvija Grosa. Although these articles all deal with cases in the history of Latvian art, the rethinking of the national canon is urgent in Estonia and Lithuania as well.

Another group of papers is dedicated to reflecting on the theories and methods used in art history. They address the research on the Soviet period and the need to renew it by using relatively new theoretical approaches. The text 'Expired Monuments: Case Studies on Soviet-era Architecture in Latvia through the Kaleidoscope of Postcolonialism', by Maija Rudovska, and my text 'Art History and Postcolonialism: A Lithuanian Case' analyse the application of the theory of postcolonialism in post-Soviet research. The authors of these papers raise the issue of what concepts of the postcolonial theory can be useful for research on the Soviet period, rather than asking if the postcolonial approach is suitable for the analysis of Soviet art and architecture. Maria-Kristiina Soomre's paper 'Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations' suggests exploring the processes of the Soviet period through the history of exhibitions and its methods. In this way, a wider and more contextualised version of the art history of the Soviet period is presented.

The texts by Renata Šukaitytė and Agnė Narušytė analyse contemporary artworks through the prism of memory. However, not only the discussion of the memory discourse in artworks, but also the theoretical approaches used for the analysis of art are important in these papers. In her text 'The Drift Along a Traumatic Past in the Cinematic Worlds of Šarūnas Bartas', Šukaitytė analyses the relation between the past and the present in the Lithuanian director's films, using the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In her paper 'Contemporary Lithuanian Photography: The Discourse of Memory', Narušytė reflects on photographs and the narrative of the Lithuanian past that they create, using the multidisciplinary approach of visual studies.

According to the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, the narrative of history is essentially selective; it 'remembers' certain events of the past and 'forgets' others. Yet 'forgotten' or 'blocked' memories do not disappear; they settle in the collective unconscious and influence the life of society from there.² As the editor of this issue, I hope that the papers included here will contribute to the unblocking of memory in art history and will offer new ideas for the further rewritings of the history of the Baltic countries.

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2 P. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 452.