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Alla Rosenfeld, Norton T. Dodge, eds. *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991.* New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002. xi + 476 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-3042-0.

Reviewed by Marie Alice L'Heureux (Department of Architecture, University of California, Berkeley)
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Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge's beautifully executed *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945-1991* not only focuses on nonconformist art of Soviet-era Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania but also sensibly provides the historic and art-history background necessary to orient most readers. It is part of a series on nonconformist art of the Soviet Union and was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *The Art of the Baltics under the Soviets* (9 December 2001 - 17 March 2002) at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. Norton Dodge, Professor Emeritus of Economics at St. Mary's College in Maryland, and a scholar of Soviet economics, started collecting unofficial Soviet art in the mid-1960s, eventually acquiring over twenty thousand works, which he and his wife Nancy donated to the Zimmerli in 1991. The 3,200-piece Soviet-Baltic collection consists of prints, paintings, drawings, photographs, and 170 sculptural works.

After a brief introductory section, *Art of the Baltics* is organized into separate Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian parts, each with essays on the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. An appendix lists the major cultural and historical events that shaped the region up to the nineteenth century. A time line, which describes the twentieth-century art scene and major historic events, facilitates cross comparisons among the three countries.

"Socialist Realism" became the only officially recognized style in the Soviet Union in 1934. The Soviet Writers' Union first defined it as "the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development" linked to the "ideological education of the toiling masses in the spirit of socialism."[1] Unofficial (or nonconformist) art was any art that either did not follow the grandiose, often didactic, and ultra-patriotic socialist-realist style (including abstract art, surrealism, expressionism, and photorealism) or that depicted forbidden subjects–from *naturesmorte* to politics. As is clear from the collection of essays, artists who did not conform to political constraints were banned from the Artists' Union and not allowed to exhibit or to obtain art supplies in any official way. Some artists, especially during Stalin's reign of terror, were deported, exiled, jailed, and even executed. The Baltic countries were first absorbed into the Soviet Union from June 1940 to 1941 and again after World War II (they were occupied by Nazi forces during the war). Consequently, they had a different experience of repression from that of the longer-standing Soviet republics, which was reflected in their nonconformist art.

Recent Western and Soviet perspectives have considered the Baltic States a "natural grouping." However, it is clear to anyone who has spent time in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania or even to anyone who simply reads the fourteen essays in this volume that the three republics have unique characteristics that transcend their similarities. Each author in the collection focuses on one of the Baltic countries and makes some cross-country comparisons with the other two. The authors also employ different methodologies–some focus on the stylistic aspects of the art (Juta Kivim=e, Sirje Helme, Eha Komissarov, and Viktoras Liutkus) while others use analytical tools and narratives to underscore the changing relationship between the state and artistic expression (Ene Sepp, Mark Allen Svede, Kestius Kuizinas). Although each essay gives a wealth of information and analysis, the overall text lacks a synthetic introduction–one that addresses both the individual essays in the collection and the commonalities and particularities of each Baltic State. This would have been a valuable addition to the volume, but as I explain below, accomplishing this is no simple task.

Three introductory essays follow Norton Dodge's brief account of the Dodge Collection of Soviet art. Sirje Helm, director of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Estonia, in "Nationalism and Dissent: Art and Politics in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under the Soviets," focuses on the historic and situational differences that lim-

ited nonconformist expression in the Baltic Republics until several years after Stalin's death in March 1953. She also argues that nonconformist styles varied across the Baltics and often moved in waves from one republic to the next. Helme highlights alternative strategies used, including drawings, and photographs by artists who created neither officially acceptable nor obviously nonconformist art, by remaining "silent," or by creating art that "lacked the slightest reference to the society" (p. 11). Nonparticipation and "working at two easels" (Svede, p. 186), where an artist produced both conformist and nonconformist art, were strategies artists used throughout the Baltics to cope with restrictions on artistic expression under Soviet occupation. Although her focus is Estonia, Helme demonstrates wide acquaintance with artists in all three of the Baltic States. She underscores that much information is only now coming to light so that the analysis in this volume does not represent the last word on Soviet-era art, although it is an important beginning. Helme tantalizingly describes works that were squirreled away during Soviet times and that are only now emerging "literally from beneath beds and from atop wardrobes" (p. 11).

Many in the Baltics would perhaps like to forget Soviet-era history. However, now is the time to collect both scattered art works and the narratives of Soviet-era artists while these participants are still alive in order to assure future critics the resources needed to understand this painful but significant period of Baltic history.

In the second introductory essay, "When Worlds Collide: On Comparing Three Baltic Art Scenarios," the independent American art critic Mark Allen Svede takes the most critical approach of the three introductory essays. He addresses both "russocentric assumptions regarding what constituted an underground" and the pitfalls that have beset Baltic art critics when "comparative martyrology" supersedes "comparative stylistics" (p. 18 and p. 246). His lively text (only sometimes too insider-referential for the uninitiated to follow completely) sequentially discusses when conditions in the Baltic States "collide," "collude," "coincide," and "elide." Svede, comfortably situated outside the Baltic region with an expertise in Latvian art, disputes the "ethnic essentialism that has steered most historical examinations" [of the artistic cultures of the three Baltic States] (p. 23). He indirectly challenges current Baltic art critics and historians by presenting the example of Herberts Dubins, a Latvian critic who broke away from the usual banalities that characterized most criticism during the Soviet period ("Estonian art is precise and rational; Latvian, monumental and classicist; Lithuanian, colorful and expressive" [p. 18]). Banalities about the art of each region are perhaps defensible to a degree but are "rarely sufficiently engaging" and obfuscate more important artistic relationships. For instance, he argues that "assigning national attributes to such [nonobjective abstract art] work is problematic" since, as Svede details, the differences did not adhere to geographic or ethnic boundaries (p. 21). Svede focuses on the interconnectivity of nonconformist artists among the Baltic Republics as well as with the Moscow and Leningrad contingencies.

Although the stylistic elements of individual artworks must be considered, they cannot be separated from the context without misreading or mischaracterizing underlying artistic intentions. For instance, Svede comments a number of times on the limited cooperation among Baltic artists before Soviet occupation–"every fifty-five years, needed or not" (referring to the relationship between the Baltic cubist art exhibit in Tartu in 1924 and the exhibition of Estonian graphic works in Latvia in 1979) (p. 20), and "only bilaterally (never trilaterally)" (p. 23 n. 1). This ignores the numerous Estonian/Latvian and Estonian/Lithuanian art exhibits that continued up to at least 1938 and the extensive cross-Baltic cooperation that went into planning and designing the Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian pavilion for the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Svede also downplays the significance of elements that "evoke indigenous ecclesiastical traditions" in Lithuania and "the colors of the outlawed national flag as a shorthand expression of patriotism" in Estonia as references that are "rarely sufficiently engaging to warrant crosscultural comparisons."

Svede then proceeds to give examples where these might be nonetheless useful–"self reflexivity in Lithuanian art often depended on literary archtypes … while Estonians tended to embrace the purely visual" (p. 22). In this he disregards his own admonitions, and lacking expertise with non-Latvian contexts, generalizes too broadly. For instance, Estonia's epic *Kalevipoeg* was a rich source of artistic expression. Although acceptable in some respects to Soviet officials who considered the epic anti-German, it was a symbol of Estonian nationalism and was often used subversively in the decorative arts and architecture. This is not to criticize Svede's essay, which is richly argued; I only mention it to underscore why cross-Baltic studies are so difficult. The countries may be small geographically, but their art and history are extremely complex. Add to this the difficulty of mastering three local languages as well as German, Russian, and Polish, and the task of cross-Baltic comparisons becomes nearly impossible.

In the last of the introductory essays, "The Phenomenon of Nonconformist Art," Alfonsas Andriuskevicius, professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts, defines five sources for the origins of nonconformist art. He characterizes them as "inner necessity," ideological opposition to the official regime, personal resentment, material profit (sell to the West), and personal limitations (no other choice). After setting out the attributes of nonconformist artists, Andriuskevicius determines that Lithuanian artists were "semi-nonconformists," "purely neither conformists nor nonconformists" (p. 28). That Lithuanian artists did not fill the mold of Russian nonconformists is defensible; Andriuskevicius's explanation for this "semi" status, however, is too neatly drawn and opens up many questions about the nature of resistance in a regime that completely controlled the public realm.

In the first of the three sections dedicated to the individual republics, four essays introduce different aspects of Estonian art. Juta Kivim=e in "Estonian Art before World War II" focuses on the European connections of the earliest Estonian artists who emerged in the mid-1800s. Since the area that became Estonia lacked an art school, Estonians studied either in St. Petersburg or more commonly at the Munich and D=sseldorf Academies of Fine Arts, as well as with artists in France, Scandinavia, and other European countries. Kivim=e argues that this accounts for the eclectic quality of Estonian art during the late Tsarist and independence periods. Kivim=e sequentially presents groups of artists and thoroughly discusses their relationship, background, and artistic styles. Examining Soviet-era art prompts questions about the link between art and politics during other periods of Baltic art. Kivim=e briefly touches on the relationship between increased realism in art in the 1930s and the political changes that followed Konstantin P=ts' 1934 coup, but the impact of the P=ts and earlier governments on artistic expression (through extensive financial support) is unclear and merits further research.

Eda Sepp's essay on Soviet-era art is a multifaceted presentation of politics, history, and artistic expression, and her thorough footnotes provide a rich source for anyone wanting to pursue this topic. The years from World War II to Stalin's death in 1953 were particularly difficult for the Baltic population. Resistance to the established order resulted in sanctions, deportations, imprisonment, and death. Consequently, unofficial art was not as confrontational as in the late 1950s and 1960s when the art community regularly produced art that was not socialist realist in style or subject and held unofficial art exhibits. These acts of resistance eventually wore down Soviet sanctions. The definition of what was dangerous to produce slipped during this period, at least until the stultifying early 1970s under Brezhnev. The habit of "pushing the limits" also helped in the ultimate reassertion of independence in 1991. Sepp concludes that "[t]he artists' tenacious efforts to achieve creative independence in their work contributed in a major way to Baltic political independence" (p. 131).

Eha Komissarov's chapter on art in Tartu (the original center of Estonian art) overlaps somewhat with Sepp's chapter and Kivim=e's introduction, often discussing the same artists. Tartu was the academic (and agricultural) center of Estonia and the heart of artistic and social innovation until Soviet policies enervated it. This essay lays out the framework for consideration but further research is needed.

Mark Allen Svede also wrote the three chapters on pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Latvian art. In "Many Easels, Some Abandoned: Latvian Art after Socialist Realism," Svede argues that historiographically the greatest challenge to producing an exhaustive history of Latvian art since 1945 is the sheer number of artistic styles, philosophies, and working strategies artists employed (p. 186). This is also true for Estonia and to a lesser degree Lithuania. A litany of variations in artistic styles is stultifying compared to a thoughtful analysis or explication of individual works. Svede argues that despite having art historians "rumored to be the highest per capita in the world," Latvia "lacks even a remotely comprehensive account of its artistic life as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 185). He continues that "few historians of any nationality would presume to write a totalizing narrative of their country's artistic culture" and that "competing critical methodologies … do a more credible job of accounting for a broader range of cultural expression" (p. 185).

Nonetheless, it is ironic that except for Irena Buzinska's timeline in the appendix, no other Latvian critics or scholars contributed to this volume. One can only imagine the (understandably) indignant buzzing in the Latvian artistic community at being left out of such a significant and prestigious publication. Criticizing the work of colleagues is problematic, especially in the small communities that exist in each of the Baltic States. Since Svede is an outsider, some might feel his comments are easy to dismiss, but his points hopefully will provoke more intense discussion on methodology and interpretation and generate additional works on Baltic cultural production within the Baltics as well as from the outside. Restrictions on the discussion of cultural history and criticism under the Soviet regime should not be perpetuated dur-

ing the age of independence. Those whose lives were severely compromised under the Soviets deserve better.

Rather than focusing on stylistic shifts, Svede relates the story behind the art–the subterfuges, disagreements, and changes in government policies and artist strategies that pushed and pulled artistic expression in Latvia. He consequently makes no attempt to enumerate Latvian artists but uses particular works to illustrate the conflicts that prevailed in Soviet Latvia. He also probes particular works, highlighting aspects of the images that would be incomprehensible to the initiated reader. He also explicitly uses critical paradigms (e.g., gender and semiotics) and challenges commonplace assertions (p. 234).

The Lithuanian section includes three essays, two by Viktoras Liutkus on pre-Soviet and Soviet art and Kestutis Kuizinas on art since 1988. Lithuania has a longer history of artistic production than either Estonia or Latvia. It was part of the Polish-Lithuanian empire/commonwealth, a Catholic country, and not absorbed into the Russian Empire until 1795. In contrast to conditions in the other two Baltic States, the 1930s were a time of rich artistic experimentation in Lithuania. Under Soviet occupation Lithuanians negotiated the restrictions imposed by Socialist Realism by reinvigorating national content in their art, biding their time (silence, the choice of the less-powerful and outnumbered), and engaging in debates on art even in the official communist press.

Liutkus's fast-paced text presents a dizzying amount of material about individual artists and works in a comprehensible way by situating the artists within the larger social/political context. Liutkus astutely extends his discussion to architecture and construction, as indeed Sepp and Svede did, which enhances the understanding of cultural production under the Soviets. In discussing individual art works, however, he sometimes gives a too abbreviated analysis. For instance he simply states that Arvydas Saltenis's *Lenin's Room* (fig. 240) "satirized Soviet ideological symbols" (p. 326) and Valentinas Antanavicius's provocative *Nostalgia* (fig. 235) is simply referenced after a general comment on assemblages (p. 322). A few additional comments about the illustrated works would help to orient the readers and enhance their understanding of what are obviously multilayered works.

Art of the Baltics is an important work for anyone interested in modern art as well as for those studying the impact of politics and ideology on material culture. Although there are some deficiencies, the variety and quality of illustrations and detailed information make it a valuable foundational text for anyone interested in the art scene of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The essays reinforce and challenge each other and ideally will provoke a lively debate among Baltic art critics, especially if they are assisted in acquiring and translating this beautiful but relatively expensive volume.

Note

[1.] Vsesoiuznyi sezd sovetskikh pisatelei [First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934], quoted in Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 34.

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