

# Foreword

The aim of both art history and art criticism is to make the artwork – along with its relevant historical contexts and current events – accessible to our imagination. After all, artworks also reside in the viewer’s consciousness where their presence is no less real, if not more intense, than in museums, galleries, public spaces and illustrated books. Putting art into words is not easy: along with the confident grasp of facts and contexts, the researcher needs to possess a vigorous and courageous imagination. Either when researching contemporary art, or interpreting the artworks of previous epochs, the art historians and critics are always busy telling stories and constructing narratives.

With the expanding scope and growing complexity of the art historical field in Lithuania, there comes the need to reflect on the discipline from within. In response to this need, in the spring of 2021, the Institute of Art Research at the Vilnius Academy of Arts organised the conference “How to Tell About Art? Art History, Criticism, Texts and Narratives in Lithuania”. The participants were invited to discuss the many histories of Lithuanian art, their authors, narratory strategies, styles and aims – in other words, approach art history from the perspective of storytelling.

The conference has raised the following questions: is there anything like the Lithuanian school of art history? is there a tradition of storytelling in Lithuania art history? who writes our art history and how? what disciplines and what liberates the narratives? do we still need art critics today, when the artists themselves are discussing and introducing their own art with increasing virtuosity? what is the role of imagination in shaping the art historical narrative, and vice versa: how the latter shapes and inspires our imagination? The conference papers and discussions served as a fertile ground for further developments, which also resulted in the entire issue of *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* being dedicated to this productive topic.

The first chapter is titled “Art Historical Discipline in Lithuania: Forms and Narratives”, and it features reflections on the factors that keep the discipline alive, its fundamental values, and its narratives, both major and minor, along with the analysis of the various forms of storytelling (academic texts, exhibitions, TV shows), their effectiveness and the power of media. The chapter starts with Aleksandra Aleksandravičiūtė’s critical overview of the development of the art historical discipline during the first three decades of independent Lithuania (1990-2021). By focusing primarily on the academic art historical publication, Aleksandravičiūtė shows the scale of the changes within the discipline; discusses the questions of institutionalisation, the expansion in objects and methodology of research, and the generational and technological change; and points out the features of the emerging national school of art history. This overview is followed by two papers on curatorial practices and exhibition history. Lolita Jablonskienė analyses how exhibitions of the last two decades have substantially contributed to the emergence of Lithuanian design as a new object of art historical research. Giedrė Jankevičiūtė reflects on the exhibitions representing the art and artistic life during the period of WWII, and discusses their role in shaping the historical memory. Jogintė Bučinskaitė’s research focuses on the relation between art and TV as the powerful medium. The chapter is concluded with Erika Grigoravičienė’s text in which she employs the new materialist notion of agency to interpret the art of Antanas Gudaitis from the perspective of the inter-species cohabitation.

Chapter two – “Pioneers: People and Artworks” – focuses on personalities, their initiatives and symbolical achievements that bear significance to the national cultural history. Austėja Šmigelskaitė analyses Vasari’s canon as the basis for the first publication on Lithuanian art history – “The Report on the Life and Works of Simonas Čechavičius” by the Vilnius University professor Joseph Saunders who first read it as a paper in 1815. Lijana Štavičiūtė-Natalevičienė writes about Stasė Gudonytė-Bizokienė, the founder of Kaunas Arts and Crafts School for Women, the only art-oriented college in the Interwar Lithuania. In her search for the first ‘Lithuanian’ film, Lina Kaminskaitė reflects on the early history of the Lithuanian film industry and discusses the concept of national cinema.

The third chapter is titled “(Self-)Interpretations” and it lends a spotlight to the artist’s perspective. The four texts reflect on art historical narratives, and consider storytelling as both an art form and a way of doing artistic research. Arnas Anskaitis analyses the academic requirements of doctoral studies in arts, and criticises the established divide between the so called creative and research (written) parts. Anskaitis questions the need for such a divide and argues for a way to overcome it. Eglė Grėbliauskaitė reflects on the relation between the artistic and art historical writing, and underlines the importance of locating the center of value in the discourses on art. In her research, Karolina Jašinskaitė analyses the ways exhibition architecture facilitates or, on the contrary, inhibits the curatorial intentions. Jašinskaitė demonstrates how the visitors come up with various narratives as they navigate the show, and how the analysis of visitors’ trajectories can improve on the exhibition architecture. The issue is concluded with an illustrated story by Marta Vosyliūtė who, with a tasteful pinch of irony, traces the circulation of words and texts within artworks, exhibitions, and narratives, both art historical and non-academic. While being explicitly critical, Vosyliūtė also argues that “everyone can tell stories about art in whichever way they like, and the best way to do it is through books”. By concluding her text with a rap of exhibition titles (which might as well pass as an excellent karaoke number), Vosyliūtė demonstrates that the stories about art can come in the form of songs too.

We hope that the collective reflection by the authors in this issue of *AAAV* will in turn further deepen the self-reflection within the art historical discipline, reveal its current and historical shifts and transformations, and allow us to better notice how the discourse on art gets shaped, complemented, and questioned by the insights from the disciplines that are still relatively young in the Lithuanian context, like film theory and artistic research. We thus welcome the new narrators that come into the scene to enrich it with their own narratives and novel forms of storytelling.

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