

Culture Magazines as a Source of Art History: Editorial Choices and Politics in Latvia

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Owing to its fragmentary and sporadic character, visual art criticism in Latvia fails to do justice to the complexity and diversity of the contemporary art scene. In the Latvian media sphere, there is an acute lack of a platform for sustained critical reflection upon art. Such a platform is necessary to create a sufficiently robust and reliable archive for future art history, while also addressing the needs of an inclusive, intellectually engaged society for the widest possible discussion of artistic events. The article examines several factors that have contributed to the current situation and argues for the need for regular reflection on art in the public sphere. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the interdependent fields of journalism and art history, and situates the discussion of art criticism in the media within the broader context of the contemporary geopolitical and economic situation. The article examines three significant Latvian art magazines published in different historical periods that are particularly important for the history of twentieth-century Latvian art: *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* (1920–1929), *Māksla* (1959–1996), and *Studija* (1997–2017). These magazines provide detailed and refined surveys of the arts of their respective periods. Although their longevity and content were shaped by the political contexts in which they were produced, as well as by the financial constraints, they have stood the test of time and demonstrated their capacity to influence both the tastes and values of their contemporary societies and the development of art history.

Keywords: art criticism, cultural media, *Ilustrēts Žurnāls*, *Māksla*, *Studija*, Latvian art history.

Introduction: Subject Relevance

Nowadays, visual art criticism in Latvia finds itself in a difficult situation due to a number of global and local factors. While professional art criticism does exist, the local art scene is addressed in a chaotic and fragmentary manner. According to the study *Diversity of the Latvian Media Environment*, conducted as part of a collaborative project between the University of Latvia and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia in 2017–2018,¹ weekly supplements to two major daily newspapers and three websites dedicated to cultural events provide a relatively regular overview of the developments in visual art. Moreover, art news is covered by several special-interest magazines, radio broadcasts, a public television program, and occasional podcasts. This generally positive assessment of media engagement with cultural events in Latvia, however, belies the insufficient coverage of the contemporary art scene.

While the documentation of artistic developments is essential for art history, many noteworthy artistic events of various kinds are neither critically evaluated nor documented, and sometimes not even mentioned. Since the rise of internet technologies, there has been a widespread illusion that everything is recorded and preserved somewhere; as a result, for several decades, the targeted and systematic selection and archiving of current visual artistic events has seemed superfluous. Future art historians will find it difficult, if not impossible, to fill in the lacunae thus created in the history of art. The fragmentary nature of the chronicle of Latvian visual art may hinder the ability of future art scholars to interpret the artworks of our time within a reliable overall picture of the period. While a range of contingent factors contributes to the creation of an artistic canon, it is precisely contemporary art criticism that will largely determine who enters the annals of art history, as well as the hierarchy of artists and artworks.

This is the editorial dilemma: which artistic phenomena to examine and highlight and which to ignore. It must be admitted, however, that the problem of insufficient media engagement with contemporary Latvian art is not limited to often arbitrary editorial decisions. For nearly a decade, there has been no periodical in Latvia dedicated specifically to visual

1 Vita Zelče, ed., *Latvijas mediju vides daudzveidība* (LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2018).

art, disrupting the communication chain between artist and audience, as described in the universally accepted communication model. This issue is related to the broader crisis of art criticism, noted repeatedly in recent decades (for example, by the American art historian James Elkins),² and to the crisis of cultural journalism, thoroughly examined by the Nordic cultural media researcher Maarit Jaakkola.³ The Latvian art historian Stella Pelše addresses these problems in the context of postmodern pluralism:

[...] what is to be done if the authority of the unifying 'idea of a work of art' can no longer be upheld and the critic is aware that the most diverse kinds of art have the right to coexist? How can we truly assess the success of the performance and the strength of the conviction invested in the work within the framework of its chosen means of expression?⁴

The media theorist Ilva Skulte observed that the domain of cultural journalism in Latvia is relatively circumscribed and characterised by a network of close personal ties: journalists often work as PR specialists; artists write art criticism and often become bureaucrats responsible for cultural policies and programs; and representatives of cultural media apply for financial support from the same grant committees as the artists whose work they are expected to evaluate critically:

Fragmented, insecure and with a small financial base, the cultural media has established rather problematic strategies of surviving within the traditional media system in Latvia—some of the organizations tend to save money by employing a small number of workers (freelancers or just enthusiasts) – sacrificing quality, broader scope and audience (who turns to media with star writers, professionals with good style or at least, investments in marketing) as well as occasionally their journalistic autonomy. (..) The field of cultural journalism in conceptualisations of editors and producers of media is almost

- 2 James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Prickly Paradigm Press; Bristol University Press, 2003).
- 3 Maarit Jaakkola, *The Contested Autonomy of Arts and Journalism: Change and Continuity in the Dual Professionalism of Cultural Journalism* (PhD diss., Tampere University, 2015).
- 4 Stella Pelše, "Mākslas kritika Latvijā un stilistisko analogiju mazapgūtās teritorijas," in *Mākslas darbs un komentārs*, ed. Ieva Kolmane (Latvijas Estētikas asociācija, 2001), 57.

divided between two poles—the journalistic and the aesthetical (..) and is tended towards the more journalistic pole in times of crisis, whereas support by government is small and going to the mostly non-journalistic part of the field, developing this gap even more (as those who are not able to think “journalistically” ended their operations during crisis).⁵

One of the principal reasons for the underrepresentation of visual art in the media is related to changes in the art world that took place in the 1990s with the emergence and strengthening of the curatorial function. Historically, both journalism and academic art history initiated and facilitated discussions about art, focusing on the quality of artworks and their interrelationships, and art criticism served as the primary vehicle for the discussion of contemporary art. Recently, however, the dominant role of art criticism in public debate on art has been supplanted by the curatorial function: curators have become a new type of art critic, generating interpretations and contexts through the organisation of art exhibitions. Classical art criticism, traditionally expressed in essays and books, is losing its influence, and the epicentre of critical reflection on art is shifting toward curatorial texts and other formats.⁶ Whether curators can fully assume the function traditionally performed by art critics and act as skilful mediators between artist and public remains an open question.

The aim of this article is to examine the role of art magazines in reflecting the developments in the contemporary art world and to argue that critical examination of visual art in the media is vitally important for maintaining the link between artist and public. In particular, it considers the role of cultural periodicals in shaping the tastes and values of the reading public and their contributions—or lack thereof—to the Latvian art history. To this end, the article surveys cultural publications from different historical periods, focusing on three most important art magazines in Latvia: from the interwar period, the Soviet era, and the turn of the millennium.

5 Ilva Skulte, “The Concept of Cultural Journalism: What the Editors in Latvia Think They Do When Doing Cultural Journalism,” *Žurnalistikos tyrimai*, no. 8 (2015): 67, <https://doi.org/10.15388/zt/jr.2015.8.8842>.

6 Paul O'Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in *The Biennial Reader: The Bergen Biennial Conference*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Bergen Kunsthall; Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 234.

To date, relatively little academic research has been devoted to Latvian art journalism. Certain historical periods have received more attention than others, owing to the work of individual scholars. One such period is the mid-nineteenth century, examined in detail in the historian and media researcher Vita Zelče's monograph *Latvian Newspapers: Newspapers in Their Time and Society, 1822–1865* (2009). During the period covered by this study, however, the very concept of “art” and its associated vocabulary were still in the process of formation in Latvia. Another extensively researched historical period is the first third of the twentieth century, explored by the art historian Stella Pelše in her dissertation *History of Latvian Art Theory: Definitions of Art in the Context of the Prevailing Ideas of the Time (1900–1940)* (2004). Publications on art in the press of the early twentieth century and the interwar period have also been addressed in studies by various authors of artists' biographies and art researchers. The most significant overviews of the representation and interpretation of art in the press during these periods can be found in the relevant chapters of volumes 4 and 5 of the *Art History of Latvia* by the art scholars Kristiāna Ābele and Eduards Kļaviņš, which also examine the contributions of the most prominent writers of the time to art criticism. In addition, a number of graduate theses dedicated to the analysis of individual press publications on art have been defended at the Art Academy of Latvia. Students and researchers in communication studies at the University of Latvia and at Riga Stradiņš University also regularly analyse such publications from the perspective of media theory. For example, the article “Diversity of Cultural Discourses in the Latvian Media” by Skaidrīte Lasmane and Zane Radzobe, published in the collection *Diversity of the Latvian Media Environment* (2018), edited by Vita Zelče, examines the current state of cultural media. The literary scholar and media theorist Ilva Skulte has also addressed the current state of cultural journalism in Latvia in several academic articles.

The Media as Generators of Value and Meaning

Since the national awakening in the mid-nineteenth century, journalism has been an important source for research on the visual arts of Latvia.

Beginning with such publications as *Pēterburgas Avīzes* (Petersburg Newspaper), *Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts* (Houseguest Monthly), *Zalktis* (Grass Snake), *Vērotājs* (Observer), *Austrums* (East), and *Svari* (Scales), newspapers and magazines in Latvia not only reported on contemporary social developments but also published articles and reviews which constitute an important source for art history. Writers and artists themselves contributed regularly, creating the impression that all important developments in the art world were at least noticed, if not fully discussed. By exchanging ideas and engaging in lively discussions in periodicals, Janis Rozentāls (1866–1916), Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962), Jūlijs Madernieks (1870–1955), Gustavs Šķilters (1874–1954), and others made important contributions to the formation of the Latvian art canon. Taken together, their articles—often accompanied by photographs of artworks—offer a vivid and comprehensive portrait of the art of the era. Indeed, art researchers working on this period rely on this material: references to periodical publications from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sometimes constitute a substantial portion of research bibliographies. It is noteworthy that the late nineteenth century was a period of rapid social polarisation in Latvian society, divided into native and alien communities, and that, for the first time in their history, Latvians developed what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has termed the public sphere—that is, the domain in which public opinion is formed and members of society express their thoughts on issues of common interest. Habermas mentions eighteenth-century English coffeehouses, Parisian salons, German reading clubs, and small-circulation intellectual journals as key examples of the public sphere. In nineteenth-century Latvia, analogous spaces included various societies and pubs, which were soon complemented by the press. Thanks to press archives, it is possible to reconstruct and, in a sense, “overhear” the debates and discussions that took place within this sphere.⁷ Since around 2008, however, the “public sphere” in Latvia has shifted from the press to social networks, which are far more elusive than print media. Moreover, the abundance of data in the information age makes it all the more necessary to consciously preserve what is deemed important, lest it vanish without a trace.

7 Vita Zelče, “Veidenbauma publicistika,” in *Eduards Veidenbaums. Dzīve un daiļrade: konteksti un recepcija*, ed. Māra Grudule (Latvijas Universitāte, 2020), 48.

Today, the concept of the public sphere introduced by Habermas is often viewed with scepticism, as “an ideal construct in which private issues are not discussed, individuals form free and independent [...] opinions, and people meet in the public sphere to develop shared views based on positions formed in private, without state interference.”⁸ Habermas himself identifies three elements in the contemporary public sphere: “public space,” “discourse,” and “reason.” Moreover, the audience—that is, viewers and listeners—is not just a passive recipient of the message but an active participant in its creation and transmission, for whom the exchange of judgments and opinions is more important than the passive observation of individual actions.⁹ Media researchers emphasise that modern technologies increasingly exclude the concept of the consumer from the description of the audience, replacing it with that of participation. Any medium—press, television, radio, or internet—can contribute to the formation of ideas, meanings, values, and attitudes. Cultural media enable audiences to compare their own assessments of relevant phenomena with those of others and to adopt positions in dialogue with experts and critics. The task of the media is not to construct utopian value systems, but to offer evaluations of, and rational orientation within, ongoing social processes. Nonetheless, the media actively participate in the production of meanings, assigning significance not only to contemporary phenomena but also to visions of the future and interpretations of the past. Through news, interviews, reviews, and other forms of communication, they reproduce and generate cultural events and values, broadening the range of public goals and interests and expanding the value horizon.¹⁰ Informing the public about artistic events and providing critical reflection on them is inseparable from processes of selection and interpretation. In this way, meaning is attributed to artistic events, shaping public

- 8 Rolands Tjarve, “Publiskās sfēras teorētiskais koncepts: pamata izpratnes un to izmantojums sabiedrisko mediju novērtējumā un analizē,” in *Latvijas mediju ekoloģija 2020. gada pandēmijas krīzē*, ed. Vita Zelče, Skaidrīte Lasmane, and Mairita Zitmane (LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2018), 460.
- 9 Jürgen Habermas, “Public Space and Political Public Sphere: The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in My Thought,” *Esprit*, no. 8 (2015): 12–25, <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-esprit-2015-8-page-12?lang=en>.
- 10 Skaidrīte Lasmane and Zane Radzobe, “Kultūras diskursu daudzveidība Latvijas medijos,” in *Latvijas mediju vides daudzveidība*, ed. Vita Zelče (LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2018), 397.

beliefs, values, tastes, and actions. However, Habermas's concept of the public sphere is not fully applicable to the contemporary communication environment, as the media often focus on individual instances and personalities rather than on ideas. This emphasis on particular cases and individuals can hinder the public's ability to discern and evaluate what is most important.

In order to serve the public interest and promote the public good, high-quality cultural journalism must be based on three principles embedded in media policy: objectivity, diversity, and freedom. According to the study *Diversity of the Latvian Media Environment*, conducted by the University of Latvia and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, this goal can be achieved "[...] firstly, through the diversity of sources; secondly, through the diversity of cultural genres and trends; thirdly, by viewing current cultural events from a historical perspective and in regard to the foreseeable future; fourthly, by subjecting factual information to in-depth analysis; fifthly, by covering the widest possible cultural space, including elitist, popular, ethnic, global, regional, central, and peripheral cultural fields."¹¹ In regard to Latvian cultural media, the study concludes that "a sufficiently creative and professional network of cultural program producers and journalists has been formed to utilise the communicative possibilities of both the press and the electronic media," and that "the diversity of cultural discourses is easily provided by the actually existing cultural environment in which a great number of various creative events take place." However, the media environment lacks "a broader perspective on cultural developments, trends, and goals: representation of cultural events is insufficiently complemented by the audience's involvement in the formation of cultural processes." The study also notes that experts and academics are involved only in certain specialised press publications and radio broadcasts.¹² While the performing arts in Latvia—such as theatre, cinema, and music—are subject to regular critical scrutiny in specialised publications, visual art lacks a comparable dedicated platform. This gap is partly addressed by the online art and culture website *Arterritory*. Nevertheless, while the findings of the study are applicable to the cultural field as a whole, they are not relevant to the specific situation of visual art coverage in the media.

¹¹ Ibid., 394.

¹² Ibid., 411.

Visual Art in Three Art Magazines

Fortunately, the representation of twentieth-century art in Latvian media can be studied through three high-quality art magazines that provided professional and engaged coverage of the art world, offering incisive observations, lucid commentary, and astute analysis.

1. *Ilustrēts Žurnāls*

During the interwar period, characterised by the flourishing of national arts and the press, a magazine with a telling title, *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* (Illustrated Magazine), proved to be a notable success. Along with several other art publications (*Senatne un Māksla* [Antiquity and Art], *Zaļā Vārna* [Green Crow], *Laikmets* [Epoch]) and regularly published articles on art in general-interest periodicals, it facilitated an active and lively exchange of ideas in the art world of its time. *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* was financed by the government and published by the Latvian Telegraph Agency in Riga from 1920 to 1929. Although it had a wide readership—around 10,000 copies for a monthly publication in Latvia was a considerable circulation—and received a diploma at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925, its publication ceased after the government funding was withdrawn. The magazine focused on contemporary events in art and literature and laid the foundation for modern illustrated weekly magazines in Latvia. However, “when competition intensified in the market for general-interest weekly magazines, the magazine changed significantly in 1925. *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* became an elitist, high-quality monthly publication devoted to art and literature, featuring rich, colourful reproductions of artworks.”¹³

Under the liberal leadership of Alberts Prande (1893–1957), *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* responded to both local and international developments and covered a broad range of topics and genres, including exhibition reviews, critiques of newly constructed buildings, narrative portraits of artists from different historical periods, analytical surveys of the art market, and reports on private collectors’ residences. Across these genres, the articles expressed frank value judgements and at times rather sharp critical opinions, which occasionally provoked strong reactions.

13 Ainars Dimants, “Ilustrētie nedēļas žurnāli,” in *Latvijas Republikas prese 1918–1940*, ed. Richards Treijs (Zvaigzne ABC, 1996), 268.

Ilustrēts Žurnāls is an important resource for a future history of Latvian art not only because of its comprehensive coverage of contemporary artistic events but also due to its column “Forgotten Latvian Artists,” which for the first time brought together available information on several important artists who had fallen out of the emerging canon of Latvian art history. The first surveys of the development of Latvian national art can be found in Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš’s lecture *Our Art*, written in 1912 on behalf of the Latvian Art Promotion Society (published in the magazine *Druva* [Crop Field] in 1914), and in Jānis Dombrovskis’s *Latvian Art* (1925), the first book ever published on the subject.¹⁴ Eduards Kļaviņš mentions the professionally trained Jānis Siliņš (1896–1991), Alberts Prande, and Visvaldis Peņģerots (1897–1938) among the most significant art critics of the interwar period, noting that they “filled the pages of *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* with articles about deceased artists [...]. The numerous contributions of Siliņš, Prande, and Peņģerots on their contemporaries were artist biographies and descriptions of artistic activity, which can be classified as art historical texts.”¹⁵

From today’s perspective, *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* is particularly important for its lively column “Chronicle,” in which the editorial team reported on major developments in Latvian and international art. What distinguishes this column is its candid and emotionally charged evaluations of various artistic events, ranging from irony to indignation. Moreover, architects and scenographers on the editorial staff ensured that extensive, illustrated reviews were devoted both to innovations in urban development and to ephemeral stage designs in theatre and opera. Thanks to the authors’ unrestrained expression of personal judgements and assessments, these reviews have become an important source for research into the history of theatre and architecture, enabling imaginative reconstructions of the architectural and sculptural forms they describe and thus contemporary quests for authenticity in artistic practice.

14 Kristiāna Ābele, “Mākslas zinātne Latvijā,” *Nacionālā enciklopēdija*, last modified June 27, 2024, <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/8580-m%C4%81kslas-zin%C4%81tne-Latvij%C4%81>.

15 Eduards Kļaviņš, “Mākslas dzīve,” in *Latvijas mākslas vēsture V: 1915–1940*, ed. Eduards Kļaviņš (Neputns, 2016), 94.

2. *Māksla*

According to “the principle of centralisation,” which defined the prevalent hierarchical, top-down model of administrative management during the Soviet period, periodical publications were assigned to rigid categories. Within the system, Latvian visual art was allocated to the newspaper *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) and the magazine *Māksla* (Art). At the same time, given the general respect and prestige of cultural professionals even under Soviet occupation, regular columns on visual art and artists were also published in periodicals across other categories.

The magazine *Māksla*, published by the Creative Unions from 1959 to 1996, was a high-quality resource created by professionals in their respective fields and read not only by artists but also by a broader public. In 1989, its circulation reached 19,000 copies.¹⁶ As in *Ilustrēts Žurnāls*, most contributions took the form of reviews and narrative portraits, while interviews appeared less frequently than in the interwar publication.

The dual character of *Māksla* was manifest already in its first issue, for which the prominent Latvian writer Andrejs Upītis contributed an introduction. This duality persisted until the early 1980s, when the magazine continued to publish both ideologically charged articles and texts that transgressed the boundaries of official ideology. Patriotic and formulaic editorials, aligned with the directives issued at regular Party congresses and criticising the latest developments in the art world, were written by officially sanctioned Soviet ideologues, thereby ensuring the ideological conformity of the publication and safeguarding it from accusations of moral or political deviation. The most critical and derogatory editorials, by contrast, often appeared under the guise of the “voice of authority” and were published anonymously. Sometimes, however, alongside an ideologically driven text, an article expressing a completely opposing viewpoint would be published.

Moscow-based critics often wrote for *Māksla* about the success of Latvian artists at joint USSR exhibitions. Paradoxically, they tended to assess new developments in Latvian art much more favourably than domestic reviewers, and their recognition served as a protective mechanism preventing local critics from suppressing innovations in order to conform to official

16 Sanita Bučeniece, “The Depiction of Visual Arts of the Second Half of the 20th Century in the Arts Periodical *Māksla*. 1959–1996” (BA thesis, Art Academy of Latvia, 2009), 10.

ideology and appease the ruling elite.¹⁷ The magazine's task was to register and classify all developments in the art world, including emerging tendencies; as a result, its articles introduced numerous new terms into Latvian art vocabulary, beginning with Herberts Dubins's notion of "harsh style."

As a proponent of the official position, *Māksla* does not reflect the stylistic diversity that characterised the Latvian art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. A large percentage of its articles focused on artists working in the style of socialist realism. In addition, the magazine regularly published material on practitioners of the decorative and applied arts—ceramics, textile, glass, and metalwork—as well as scenographers. Considerable attention was also given to the periphery. Today, however, a markedly opposite approach can be observed.

At the same time, from the mid-1970s onwards, *Māksla* began to reflect Latvian art life more objectively, addressing a broader range of stylistic tendencies alongside socialist realism. Likewise, art historical writing began to move gradually away from official doctrine towards a position of stylistic pluralism. The magazine's staff included representatives of different generations, and its editorial policy regarding contributors and profiled artists favoured innovative work across different age groups. It is therefore not surprising that the magazine almost completely omitted (publishing only two black-and-white photographs) coverage of the scandalous exhibitions *Svētki* (Holidays) (1972) and *Daba. Vide. Cilvēks* (Nature-Environment-Human Being) (1984), which are considered to have marked the emergence of unconventional and experimental art in Latvia. At the same time, however, unorthodox movements such as op art, pop art, kinetic art, installation art, and the Bauhaus school were surprisingly often mentioned in articles on design innovations.¹⁸ Such texts, published alongside ideologically charged material, constituted a form of editorial risk within an official state-funded publication and nevertheless contributed to the circulation of new artistic ideas that culminated in the exhibition *Daba. Vide. Cilvēks* in 1984. The exhibition was ultimately closed after a delegation from the German Democratic Republic visited it and was outraged by its perceived deviation from Soviet ideals.

17 Ibid., 36.

18 Valdis Celms, "Kustības estētiskā apguve," *Māksla*, no. 3 (1977): 14–15; Herberts Dubins, "'Bauhauza' idejas vēstures gaitā," *Māksla*, no. 1 (1977): 9–11.

The dual editorial policy of *Māksla* is clearly visible in the issue that published articles saturated with party jargon alongside an interview with Maija Tabaka, the first Soviet painter to receive a scholarship for a year-long stay in West Berlin, which attracted particular attention. After her return to Latvia in 1978, she was promptly interviewed by Jānis Borgs, and in the interview Tabaka shared her impressions of Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Christo, the Fluxus movement, and the *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel.¹⁹ By publishing this interview, the magazine was significantly ahead of its time, as such topics only began to receive extensive press coverage in Latvia ten or twenty years later. At the end of the 1980s, the magazine also sometimes functioned as a platform for the dissemination of artists' own ideas. A notable example is the ironic interview with himself by the painter and performer Miervaldis Polis, published in 1988, in which he poses himself flattering questions, justifying the ideas of the *Egocentrs* he had founded.²⁰

A lively and popular section of the magazine was dedicated to architecture. The articles published there provide a comprehensive overview of almost all major Soviet-era buildings and their interiors in Latvia. Since many of these structures were demolished or renovated at the turn of the century, the magazine now serves as an important witness to Soviet architectural history. For example, Jānis Borgs's article "Mākslas portrets interjerā" ("Art Portrait in the Interior")²¹ provides not only rich factual material but also a means of reconstructing the interior of the restaurant Jūras pērle (Sea Pearl) and the sculptural composition by Arta Dumpe and Viktorija Pelše, installed in 1980 near the Central Television building in Moscow. The magazine also documents such important innovative interiors of the period, including the cafes Sēnīte (Little Mushroom) in Inčukalns, Pūt vējiņi (Blow, the Winds), Rostoka (Rostock), and others. It further bears witness to the construction of major buildings such as the hotels Latvija and Rīdzene, the Dailes Theatre, the Television Building, the Press House, and the Congress Hall, some of which appear substantially altered today. One issue even published selected blueprints of the controversial, ultimately unrealised Riga underground, or metro, project.

19 Jānis Borgs, "Bezkrastu māksla 52°30'Z p.13°17'A g," *Māksla*, no. 3 (1978): 12–15.

20 Miervaldis Polis, "Miervaldis intervē Poli," *Māksla*, no. 1 (1988): 16–19.

21 Jānis Borgs, "Mākslas portrets interjerā," *Māksla*, no. 3 (1982): 2–9.

Throughout the entire period of publication, the magazine published articles on the Latvian old masters, indicating that the editorial staff considered it important to maintain interest in the origins of Latvian visual art. Although *Māksla* largely avoided discussing the flourishing of Latvian art during the interwar period, it did publish reproductions of artworks from that era, typically without dates—a necessary precaution in the context of ubiquitous Soviet censorship. Only in 1988 did these interwar reproductions begin to be dated. It is also in *Māksla* that the first publications on such key figures in Latvian art as Voldemārs Matvejs (1877–1914), Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891–1920), and Romans Suta (1896–1944) appeared. In addition, the magazine published artists' memoirs about their colleagues, which constitute an important source for Latvian art history.

In 1987, *Māksla* acquired a strong competitor in the magazine *Avots* (Fountainhead, or *Rodnik* in its Russian version), published by the Latvian SSR Writers' Union, which quickly became an influential platform for the new, more radical artistic, literary, and critical reflection on the period of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*. The change of the political system, the collapse of Soviet infrastructure, and the economic crisis of the late 1980s affected all periodical publications. Following Latvia's restoration of independence in 1990–1991, existing cultural journals lost part of their original *raison d'être*. *Māksla*, however, continued to be published until 1996.

3. *Studija*

With the publication of its first issue in 1997, the visual arts magazine *Studija* (Studio) rose to the leading position among Latvian art periodicals of its time. Unlike the previously discussed magazines, *Studija* was a private venture published under the auspices of the newly founded publishing house Neputns. It also received support through state grants and private patrons. The magazine can be described as aesthetically refined and comprehensive in its treatment of the contemporary art scene. With its primary focus on the artist, it continued, in principle, the tradition of its Soviet predecessor, serving as a communication tool between artists

and the reading public. It soon became a sought-after platform, with artists seeking the attention of the editorial team.

The ambition of the editor Laima Slava to construct a form of art historical discourse shaped the comprehensive character of *Studija*, which combined analytical and informative content with visually compelling and thought-provoking presentation. The success of the magazine was also facilitated by the new printing technologies, which ensured high-quality graphic design and reproductions of artworks. In this sense, the editorial policy of *Studija* was closely related to developments in printing technology, confirming Marshall McLuhan's well-known thesis that communication technologies are primary drivers of social and cultural change. In particular, the magazine focused on publishing high-quality reproductions of artworks and profiling innovative artists—functions that are largely assumed today by social networks. Thus, in collaboration with Neputns and the newly founded Jelgava printing house, *Studija* developed a new visual and editorial language in Latvian magazine and book design.

Until the global disruptions of the 2008 global financial crisis, the magazine offered a comprehensive overview of developments in the art world, covering both classical and contemporary art and engaging with the challenges presented by new digital technologies in Latvia and internationally. After 2008, editorial leadership changed several times, and *Studija* repositioned itself towards a narrower readership interested in contemporary conceptual art. *Studija* remains a significant resource for both qualitative and quantitative art-historical research due to its focus on local exhibitions and other contemporaneous domestic and foreign artistic events as well as its interviews and surveys of the art market. The editorial ambition was to cover, in principle, the full breadth of Latvian art production. Contributions came from a diverse range of authors, including students and regional reporters, whose accessible and engaging interpretations and evaluations of artistic phenomena also broadened the magazine's appeal beyond specialist audiences.

For several years, *Studija* also published dedicated issues on design and photography, which is particularly important given the scarcity of publications on design and the applied and decorative arts in recent decades.

These publications contributed to recovering a critical vocabulary for reflecting on these fields. Unfortunately, *Studija* ceased publication in 2017 following the withdrawal of support from its long-standing private patron and the State Cultural Capital Fund. To date, no comparable publication has emerged to replace it.

Conclusion

The fragmentary and sporadic character of visual arts criticism in Latvia makes it difficult to construct a comprehensive history of Latvian art. Over the past decade, there has been no regular specialised critical publication devoted to visual art, despite the fact that such a platform is essential for both art criticism and art history: it not only documents current artistic developments but also enables their critical discussion. While the Latvian media appears diverse in its coverage of cultural and artistic issues, this diversity often conceals a lack of in-depth critical reporting on the contemporary art scene. Among the main factors contributing to this situation are limited financial and human resources, as well as inconsistent editorial policies that shape the inclusion and exclusion of artistic events for coverage. However, the crisis of art criticism and art media is not a local Latvian phenomenon; it reflects global social transformations, especially the rise of social media and the dismantling of traditional media hierarchies. In addition, critical reflection in the art world has seemingly lost its authority, as the role of the curator has increased and absorbed many of the functions once associated with art criticism.

Three high-quality art magazines from three different historical periods—interwar, Soviet, and contemporary—remain crucial to understanding the history of twentieth-century Latvian art due to their professional and detailed representation of the artistic production of their respective times. Although their longevity and content were constrained both by financial limitations and political contexts, they nonetheless played an important role in shaping Latvian art history. It is essential to emphasise that the function of media extends beyond reporting individual artistic events; it also involves critical evaluation, the formation of value hierarchies, and the

shaping of public taste. This can be accomplished by developing a platform for discussion and contextual analysis. To ensure a more complete documentation and interpretation of Latvian art, a long-term national strategy is needed to promote continual, high-quality criticism and analysis and to strengthen archival practices. The current absence of art magazines in Latvia affects not only public understanding of art but also the development of artistic processes, the critical recognition of artists, and the international visibility of the field. Addressing this situation requires a renewed approach to the funding and promotion of a media environment capable of providing professional and diverse reflection on Latvian visual art.

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Santrauka

Kultūros žurnalai kaip meno istorijos šaltinis: redakciniai pasirinkimai ir politika Latvijoje

Aiga Dzalbe

Reikšminiai žodžiai: meno kritika, kultūros žiniasklaida, *Ilustrēts Žurnāls*, *Māksla*, *Studija*, Latvijos meno istorija.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas specializuotų meno žurnalų vaidmuo dokumentuojant, interpretuojant ir formuojant Latvijos meno istoriją ir teigiama, kad specialios platformos, skirtos nuosekliai vaizduojamojo meno kritikai, nebuvimas kelia didelį iššūkį tiek šiuolaikiniam kultūros diskursui, tiek būsimiems meno istorijos tyrimams. Nors Latvijos kultūrinės žiniasklaidos laukas yra gana įvairus, bet dėl jo fragmentiškumo ir nenuoseklumo vaizduojamojo meno kritika nepakankamai atspindi šiuolaikinio meno lauko sudėtingumą ir įvairovę.

Remiantis tarpdisciplinine perspektyva, jungiančia žurnalistikos, žiniasklaidos studijų ir dailėtyros prieigas, straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip redakcinė politika, politinės aplinkybės ir ekonominės sąlygos veikė vizualaus meno reprezentaciją žiniasklaidoje. Latvijos patirtis aptariama platesnių tarptautinių diskusijų apie meno kritikos krizę kontekste, pabrėžiant, kad specializuotos spaudos nuosmukis, skaitmeninės komunikacijos iškilimas bei didėjanti kuratorystės įtaka pakeitė tradicinį meno kritikos vaidmenį ir susilpnino sistemingą šiuolaikinių meno procesų dokumentavimą.

Siekiant parodyti periodinių meno leidinių istorinę svarbą, straipsnyje analizuojami trys įtakingi Latvijos meno žurnalai, leisti skirtingomis politinėmis ir istorinėmis aplinkybėmis. Nepaisant skirtingos redakcinės politikos ir politinių bei finansinių apribojimų, su kuriais jie susidūrė, visi trys leidiniai buvo ne tik meninės veiklos dokumentai, bet ir aktyviai formavo meninio diskurso, estetinių vertybių bei Latvijos meno istorijos kanoną.

Pirmajame atvejo tyrime aptariamas *Ilustrēts Žurnāls* (1920–1929) – tarpukariu leistas vyriausybės finansuojamas žurnalas. Parodų apžvalgomis, menininkų biografijomis, architektūros kritika ir komentarais apie tarptautinę meno raidą jis skatino

gyvas viešąsias diskusijas ir padėjo tvirtus Latvijos meno istorijos pasakojimo pagrindus. Redakcinis atvirumas, aukštos kokybės vizualinės reprodukcijos ir kritiniai vertinimai reikšmingai paveikė šiuolaikinį meninį diskursą, o pats leidinys tapo vertingu to meto kultūrinio gyvenimo dokumentu.

Antrasis atvejo tyrimas skirtas *Māksla* (1959–1996) – pagrindiniam sovietmečio meno žurnalui. Nors jo redakcinę politiką formavo ideologiniai apribojimai ir oficialioji kultūrinė doktrina, leidinys vis dėlto tapo nepakeičiamu Latvijos meno istorijos šaltiniu. Greta ideologiškai konformistinių tekstų jis dokumentavo architektūros raidą, pristatė naujas menines kryptis, nuo XX a. 8 deš. atspindėjo vis įvairesnes menines tendencijas, kartais pristatydavo ir šiuolaikinį tarptautinį meną, nepaisydamas politinių apribojimų. Taigi žurnalas atskleidžia sudėtingą valstybės kontrolės, redakcinės praktikos ir meninių inovacijų santykį.

Paskutinėje atvejo analizėje nagrinėjamas žurnalas *Studija* (1997–2017), kuris po nepriklausomybės atkūrimo tapo svarbiausiu vizualaus meno leidiniu Latvijoje. Jame mokslinė analizė derėjo su aukšto lygio grafiniu dizainu ir plačia šiuolaikinio Latvijos bei tarptautinio meno panorama. Pasinaudodamas spausdinimo technologijų pažanga ir pasitelkdamas platų bendradarbių tinklą, žurnalas dokumentavo parodas, meno tendencijas, dizainą, fotografiją ir meno rinkos raidą, tuo pačiu darydamas šiuolaikinį meną labiau prieinamą tiek specialistams, tiek platesnei auditorijai. Nutraukus valstybės ir privačią finansinę paramą, leidinį teko uždaryti. Šiuo metu Latvijoje nebėra panašaus specializuoto vizualiam menui skirto leidinio.

Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad specializuotų meno leidinių funkcijos gerokai pranoksta vien meno įvykių nušvietimą. Jie nustato kritinius atskaitos taškus, konstruoja kultūrinės vertės sistemas, formuoja visuomenės skonį ir kuria archyvą, tampantį būsimos meno istorijos pagrindu. Todėl specializuotų meno periodinių leidinių išnykimas yra ne tik žiniasklaidos, bet ir kultūrinė bei mokslinė problema, daranti įtaką meno raidai, visuomenės įsitraukimui ir tarptautiniam meno pripažinimui. Latvijos meno istorijos raidai būtina tvari platforma, skirta nuolatinei kritinei šiuolaikinės vizualinės kultūros refleksijai.