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**Implications of Context (In
Lithuanian Contemporary Art) ***

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Kæstutis Kuizinas

Implications of Context (In Lithuanian Contemporary Art) *

The idea to discuss some of the implications in Lithuanian contemporary art was stimulated by the visit of Želimir Košćević, expert of the Sao Paulo biennial, to Vilnius in the autumn of the last year, and more precisely by the dilemma evidently faced by the Croatian art historian, when selecting artists for the international biennial. The fact that finally instead of one (as had been planned) two very different but original in their own artists were invited to participate in the biennial, reminded of the problem the origin of which is inseparable from a new situation on the scene of the Baltic art, i. e. the situation which was conditioned by significant current changes in the policy of East and Central Europe.

The abolition of the information barriers was undoubtedly the most significant event of the early current decade in Lithuania. It is quite natural that the end of cultural isolation is not a one-day process as it is marked by the exact dates of political manifestations in the history of the country. More or less noticeable transformations are still continuing on various levels of cultural life. One of them - the formation of a new generation of artists with its characteristic psychological type.

The new generation, mainly presented by young artists and their supporters' critics, managed to free themselves from the conditionality of the historical-political context in the course of a rather short period of time. They are the artists undamaged by the catastrophisms of the epoch, rationally orienting themselves towards the processes of international art.

The most characteristic features of this generation are a strong sense of today's time, a clear perception of creative goals and a pragmatic reasoning of artistic career. The attributes of the new generation: the exploitation of modern media and new technologies, a good command of foreign languages and always irreproachably prepared portfolios of works... Everything mentioned here, practically, does not witness anything more than the fact that Lithuania like other postregime countries is at the stage of the formation of Western ideology, way of life, and a new type of artist, who bases himself on certain rules. It is a natural phenomenon of a transitional period, and on the other hand it is no wonder that part of young artists refuse to follow the path of the new generation. They respect the traditions fostered by their local teachers and inertly submit to the existing image of creator. The problem that I want to present here rests not in the creation of the young generation but in its relationship with Lithuanian art, which had been created before the 1990 break, i. e. with the art the true value of which can be hardly perceived without a historical-political context and the local conception of significance.

It is reasonable to mention here that in Lithuanian art there was no strong layer of underground culture. In respect of the freedom concerning the employment of themes, images and politically-oriented concepts in creation, the new generation rather greatly surpasses its predecessors, who traditionally avoided to speak in their creation about the conditionality of the historical-political context. In this respect Lithuanian postwar art differs from neighboring countries and particularly the experience of Russia, where a significant part of today's art comprises the creation of the artists from a politically and socially engaged underground. The concepts of myth, metaphor and archetype frequently met in the Lithuanian art criticism of the current decades perfectly characterize the time, when the artists avoided a direct reflection of the period, plunging deep into a personified, timeless space of the myth-metaphor. In the course of time, it developed into a rather refined subjectivism of the creator, conditioned by two basic factors: objectively existing break from the processes of the world culture, its specific tendencies and a subjective dissociation from the local actualities of that time. The process of creation itself became somewhat similar to a Rococo system of searching pleasure (in this case - neutral ideas), a continuous journey to the 20th century island of Cythera.

The typology of artist formed at the end of the Soviet period, today still remains hardly perceived for exhibition curators from the West. Essentially, it is a creator with a reticent, resistential thinking, suspiciously looking at the processes of contemporary art and at the respectively changing model

of the artist's social behavior. The mentioned reticence is the result of a long spiritual resistance and ambition to retain a historically dictated national, cultural identity. The obvious unwillingness to submit to new norms and rules imported from abroad, sometimes resembles an ordinary provincial sluggishness, which is openly made use of by energetically disposed young artists of the new generation in their struggle for recognition. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that an adequate insight into the art created in the years of isolation is aggravated by the fact that this art is mute, i. e. it had been created for a long time without commenting on its real essence and mentioning even that unstable, contraband link with the phenomena of the world culture. Even today, it would be hard to find a Lithuanian artist representing a middle generation who would be able to conceptually comment on his creative searchings, whereas one cannot help noticing an inclination of the young generation to gain a deep insight into a theoretical contextuality of its creation.

The perception of creative intentions is aggravated not only by evidently passive links of the verbalization of ideas but also by a pretty limited range of the sources of the "national school" represented by the older generation (summed up by a few "local mail" addresses). It is a vital tradition of Lithuanian folk art as well as the tendencies of the interwar independent Lithuania's art. Thus, any deviation made by an artist from the traditions fostered by the school define a break from a theoretical determination of creation, which, though not too unique, is rendered due to the membership of the school. In its turn, such break marks the beginning of the formation of historically complicated aesthetic empiricism and personal mythogemmae of creation in Lithuanian modern culture. This time is best represented by the creation of the majority of Lithuanian artists of the 70s and 80s, whose creation remains topical up to the present days.

Not long ago, I had the pleasure of showing my colleague, exhibition curator from Poland, round a big exhibition of contemporary Lithuanian art in Vilnius. I did not get surprised hearing a pretty vulgar question: "Which of the exhibited artists are "export"? I suppose that this question is a good pretext to think about certain current standards and the way they are based. The review of the catalogues of the international exhibitions held in recent years with the participation of Lithuanian artists leads to the conclusion that foreign exhibition curators coming to Vilnius practically come across two art typologies worth attention and already mentioned by me. The first is represented by the creation of the new generation oriented to contemporary art forms and quality standards, whereas the quintessence of the second - a regional creator of unique aesthetic-ethical mythogemmae. The art of the

first is conditioned by the gravity of the postmodernist era, and that of the second depends on the historical-political context and the firmly formulated in the Soviet time artists' ethical code, the preamble of which contains a politically oriented condition of quality clean of the ideological sprays of the past. Quality in the art of the "myth-metaphor" generation is a kind of correlation between a significant subject and crafts mastership, i. e. a technically impeccable approximation toward the reflection of fundamental spiritual values in art. The criterion of the originality of artistic language is also mentioned, though its real importance never exceeds the "obligations" of the local context. Different from a rather rational "circumspection" of the young generation, an outlook on originality in the consciousness of the mythogemmae creator is a greatly relative condition, which does not particularly complicate the process of creation.

In the present situation, the continuation of the mentioned tendencies are best reflected in the activities of the artists and critics belonging to the group "24". According to the opinion of a young art critic: "Aesthetic program of the group "24" is substituted by a kind of a quality principle similar to the Code of Honor in the brotherhoods of knights. The group "24" can just as well sit round the table of King Arthur and perform the Group's rituals or consecrate new members, the rules may be pretty similar". The inseparable link between quality and ethical principles serves as a significant characteristic of this generation.

Quite a different probability at table of the local King Arthur can be expected for the representatives of the new generation, because in the latter's' art quality is a concrete category closer associated with reality. The concept of the artist's mission based on a romantic tradition is changed here by a pragmatic outlook on creation and morals. It is confirmed by numerous examples of contemporary art, which proportionally display everything what attracts the curator today: a clever manipulation of modern concepts, materials and techniques, an exact doze of politics, some irony and the like...

It goes without saying that this, somewhat simplified formula, reminding of a culinary recipe, does not serve by itself as a criterion of artistic result. However, it would be naive not to notice that a certain part of young artists today really consciously strive for the mentioned standards of "export quality". This, a comparatively new in Lithuania, specific tendency of Eastern bloc (i. e. a purposeful orientation to the existing demand and the satisfaction of the consumer needs of the Western art market), is not dangerous from a cultural point of view in such countries as Czech

Republic, Hungary or Poland. Those countries can boast a highly enough developed variety of artistic expression in the categories of different age groups of artists and artistic experience. Potential art experts and curators of international exhibitions simply have enough choice without fearing to lose in their projects the general levels of communicability of the contemporary art language. Completely different freedom of choice exists in such a small and ethnocentrally engaged country as Lithuania, where prevails a traditional structure of fine and applied arts, and a lot of formal novelties exist only as “genre” innovations in the general context of art. In other words, the choice is complicated by a greatly unequal development levels of modern and traditional language of art: an abundant, historically firm layer of painting, sculpture and graphic art and quite a small, though active circle of artists, who create installations, video, conceptual art, etc.

This disproportion can be hardly noticed in the exhibitions representing Lithuanian art abroad. As already has been mentioned, the disregard of the context of local art can be sometimes useful for a curator to present one or another vision of art of the “united Europe”, even in the cases when a fragment of this idea (say a work of a Lithuanian artist) is an exception or represents only some two or three per cent of national art. Surely, the easiest thing to do, would be to call these two-three per cent as Lithuanian avantgarde. However, this can hardly be the truth, because these two-three per cent of contemporary artists are best informed what is “avantgarde” today and they stopped considering themselves as part of only Lithuanian art quite a long time ago...

In this polysemantic situation, a potential expert of art cannot help facing a dilemma of the context:

1. Which is more convenient? A bothering or attractive artist's pose, i.e. an irritable, complicated individuality, a representative of the “myth-metaphor” generation, which displays no willingness to communicate, or an open, resolute artist of the generation willing to actively communicate with a curator?
2. What is more expedient? The authenticity of an artist's work full of the anachronism of form but which had absorbed the whole epoch or a representative of an international mainstream, who in the eyes of his colleagues and the audience, looks more secure, i.e. irreproachable?

Looking at the available choice from the Lithuanian point of view, in the first case it seems that due to the old or seemingly old-fashioned dialect of artistic language, a greater part of modern art in Lithuania is undeservedly being ignored; in the second case, a curator risks to be accused of the

stimulation of conjuncture tendencies and an artificial “export quality” on the local art market.

The mentioned and other problems are faced by exhibition curators who come to Vilnius from other countries. They also present general concern for the critics of Lithuanian art. They must have been no less important for the Croatian art historian Želimir Košćević who invited Gediminas Urbonas and Šarūnas Sauka to take part in the Sao Paulo biennial of this year. And the fact that invitations to participate in the international exhibition were given not for the first time to these artists, representing different Lithuanian art layers, reminds once again that there is no easy and monosemantic answer to the issues posed by the context.

*Report, made at the AICA. symposium “Position of Avantgarde in the Context of Political Changes in Europe” in Zagreb, Croatia on December 9, 1994.