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New Modern Art in Lithuania

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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.

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New Modern Art in Lithuania

I will be speaking about the newest art scene in Lithuania, the model of its functioning, which is still in the stage of formation, and trying to mark out the features typical of the transitional period. Some of conclusions, generalisations and observations may quite soon appear to be unimportant or even erroneous - well, theoretical exposures sometimes are of transitional character as well.

The main novelties and changes in Lithuanian contemporary art are associated with a new generation of artists. The existence of the “young art” has much earlier become in our consciousness an obligatory and unchangeable condition of the dispersion of contemporary art. And the creation of “the young” - the synonym for the avantgarde (the rejuvenation of art is still being speeded up today). The “coordinates” of this avantgarde were much clearer some good ten years ago. The young artists partially expanded the artistic platform of the Lithuanian artists belonging to a former generation, and partially opposed it. The firm sense of the only local context united all the artistic life and connected as much as divided the artists belonging to different generations. It goes without saying that such integrity was conditioned by the closed character of the development of art as well as by an objectively conditioned traditional orientation: I mean both an official policy of art and the “inner policy” of the “antinormative creation” - both aspects advocated different but traditionalistic aesthetics. However, in this case, it is more important to recollect another moment - the way the “new art”, embodying itself in the movements of the young, used to emerge and to be estimated in this context. In short, the shows by the young were greatly awaited and appreciated. The artistic medium reacted to its avantgarde favourably. The creation of Ėdarūnas Sauka can be called the symbol of the 80s’ “art of the young”. It was widely and variously discussed, and at the same time it could not help attracting one.

It is significant to highlight this point, since the same favourable provision welcomed the artists who started working several years later. Those who dominate the artistic life today. The sudden change, which began in the sphere of the development of Lithuanian contemporary art witnessed by this generation, was much more radical than the “gradual transitions” fixed by the former “movements of the young”. The latter did not essentially destroy the artistic context, but rather made an attempt to join it, as if enrich it. The “new art” of the current decade distinguishes itself more by its destroying potential, however, it seems not to have directly and specifically opposed either the dominant aesthetic or social environment. I would like to emphasise - it seems to me that the new Lithuanian art (it can be called *avantgarde*) was born in a non-conflicting way. It just separated itself and kept away from the context guidelines which were considered to be significant up to that time. And the falling, breaking reality of life gave its blessing to this separation.

The “new art” was born not as an alternative of the nearest artistic environment. We can simply say that it just oriented itself toward a broader medium of contemporary art. This orientation, however, was specific in its own way. The artists of the young generation were rather “discovering” the processes of international art through their creation than freely joined them (felt the taste of freedom). This was the way the artists acquired the fundamentals implanted elsewhere by art schools and academies (our neighbouring Poland can boast of such), simultaneously forming an individual character-style. Today nearly all Lithuanian artists, who follow the new style of work, are graduates (or undergraduates) of the same and the only one Vilnius Academy of Arts, which at that time did not function as a cradle of a conservative stagnation (thus it did not provoke any “anti” provision), but it, however, did not yet shape a clear artistic line either. The artists looked for it (them) on their own. First of all studying available information, later going for a shorter or longer period of time to study abroad and participating in or viewing exhibitions there. The process of internationalisation was very rapid and active, though chaotic and sometimes depending on chances (trips, meetings, impressions). The creation of the first legionaries (Gediminas Urbonas, Deimantas Narkevičius, Artūras Raila, Audrius Novickas, Darius Girėys and others) is marked not only by the priority but also by distinct individualism. They have formed and maintain today a certain new inner context which the youngest generation of artists cannot help reacting (now - directly), though it manifests itself rather as the field of a tension under formation and the structure without clear parameters.

Making an attempt to define the coordinates of this context in its new self-willed space, I would like to separate its two axes: one of them is directed

towards international, the other - to local direction. Both of them serve for the expansion and development of the “new art”, and, on the other hand, only in their interaction the phenomenon of the “new art” opens itself (and can be interpreted).

The process of localisation (the formation of the inner artistic life), which started along with the birth of the “new art”, is still continuing today. One can say that only at present (after several years) its specific results start to manifest themselves. Due to the failure to start an intellectual and organisational dialogue with the earlier artistic environment (which, by the way, goes on successfully functioning, being influenced in a certain way by today’s imperatives), the present-day avantgarde took up the formation of the environment for itself. First of all in physical spaces. The search for this particular place is peculiar and interesting due to the fact that it was stimulated and provoked not by the factors of ideological opposition (“scorn for the halls darkened by the shadows of the former artistic life”) but rather by the full ignoring of the mythogemmae of the past. The “new art” today is exhibited everywhere. The same artists (I have in mind the young ones) exhibit their works both in “prestigious official” and “prestigious alternative” places. The concept of the alternative space of art, the most suitable role for which seems to be that of the avantgarde cradle, lacks clear definition here. It is more perceptible only at the points of the “non-gallery existence”: site specific and documentational projects. In the process of localisation in physical space, the “new art” has not created a radical alternative structure, it has rather only “played up” the old one.

Another side of localisation - the consolidation in an aesthetic space. The former aesthetics of Lithuanian modern art is being still fostered by the creators of a senior generation. It develops qualitatively in its environment, hardly ever colliding with or touching the new context under formation (rather frequent attempts to juxtapose them are mere intellectual exercises). They are indeed, two non-interacting alternatives. The aesthetics of the “new art” develops as self-contained modernisation, related more to the changes in nowadays sociopsychological, economical and political reality than in a closed artistic environment. This is indeed a new characteristics of Lithuanian contemporary art, which had until now fostered the ideology of modernism solely in the frames of “art for art’s sake”, and of course a symptom of its appearing post-modern self consciousness.

At the point of modernisation (or post-modernisation) the local and international axes of the construction of the new artistic context intersect. In a historically traditionalistic environment which had been pressed by restrictions for a long time even the plain ABC of the international contemporary art is avidly being read. When looking for the points of support of the new system of coordinates - the basic fundamentals - the

specific process of “recognising” and identifying international art features in Lithuanian art manifests itself. This is of course conditional, first of all from the methodological point of view: what we try to define as post-painterly abstraction, neoexpressionism or neofigurativism, minimalism or conceptual art in Lithuania are just the searchings visually close to the mentioned trends. When the objectively existing (or having existed) ideological non-concurrences are not taken into account, the image of art which is constantly running behind emerges. This image is conceptually wrong. Having had no possibility to function naturally according to the rules of dispersion of international contemporary art, modern postwar Lithuanian art did not reflect any specific international trends (contrarily - as such they were actually unknown) but rather the whole of modern art, its general tune, though this total wholesome is a mere hypothetical, non-existent unity.

The representatives of nowadays generation of “new artists” feel themselves already different. Just as artists all over the world they are (more or less) familiar with the urgent issues in contemporary art and may approach them. They are free to choose. The decisions are diverse and very much individual. However, this appearing new mosaic does not correspond to the actual scene of international art trends either. As in all small (or just peripheral) countries the contemporary art in Lithuania develops following the general line of international avantgarde, hardly branching into separate trends. Moreover that now the international audience in its turn tends to see it as a hypothetical closed wholeness. The dimensions of individual searchings, movements and trends are substituted by the concept of region (Baltic, East European, etc.) - the mere geopolitical category. Regionalisation is a very specific satellite of our internationalisation. One can consider this to be inevitable for the state of transition, though on the other hand - it threatens to become a voluntary act of self seclusion.

Among the comments recently published on the “new art” in Lithuania I came across one which by my opinion represents a very typical local logic. The artist, reacting to the question, a quite ironical one, concerning the existing confusion in the discussions about the state of Lithuanian contemporary art, answered that our contemporary art is not worse than anywhere else - the confusion is born only of false interpretations and classifications. One of the ways to avoid these misinterpretations is to separate clearly what is locally and what is universally important in the changes on the “new art” scene. This article is an attempt to start it.