

Times of Transition

ANTS JUSKE



TALLINN.
SINIMÄE TEE 5—64, tel. 51 97 27

For many years we have been taught that art is determined by the prevailing economic and social relations. In this light, art is seen as a more or less adequate reflection of the social relations and it could be possible, for example, to tell on the basis of a work of art whether it was created in the socialist or capitalist society. In reality, this Marxist thesis was carried out by a body of repressive measures — without censorship, rules and regulations, threats and bribing art would not, by any means, have reflected the achievements of "advanced socialism". Yet there is an antidote for every poison. Despite the pressure exercised during the years of stagnation, the Baltic countries still managed to keep their art life fairly liberal. The progressive art in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania did not have to go underground as it happened in Moscow or Leningrad. Moreover, the three Baltic republics created their own system of Baltic triennials, independently of Russia, thus attempting "to cook a better soup in one nook of the huge pot". To achieve this, compromises were inevitable. Baltic artists were well informed of the radical movements in Western art, yet it was not officially allowed to pursue them in the Soviet Union. Thus they withdrew into seclusion, setting a subtly 'nice' kind of art against the officially required socialist realism, adopting 'the ivory tower aesthetics', inspired by the former art traditions of the period of independence. After all, the 'nice' nonpolitical art can be created under any régime.

As a consequence of this, there was no underground art to emerge in the of 'peestroika' which could be sold off to the West as specifically 'dissident'. Yet it became obvious that hardly anybody in the West was interested in the old-fashioned kind of 'nice' art, born out of cultural isolation. In addition, we are facing new anxieties here in our newly restored and free market-heading young Baltic states. Arts are being commercialized at a frightening speed, we are exposed to the on-coming rush of American mass

culture which has barely trickled through the 'iron curtain' until very recently. More than ever before, we are witnessing the materialization of the Marxist thesis of arts being a direct reflection of the economic relations. Since World War II, the Western avant-garde has been waging a constant war against the art market and marketeers, generating conceptual art which cannot be bought or sold. They have not been entirely successful in their strivings, even the pure idea has turned out to be salable. All this is still in store for us and it is highly questionable whether the impoverished state with a disintegrating economy can afford to pay for the freedom of its art. "Forma Anthropologica" is clearly an exhibition typical of the times of transition. On the one hand, it is an attempt to get in touch the contemporary international art, to break away from the stagnation-bred notion of 'nice' art. On the other hand, it is a reaction against the incipient commercialization of art. It is an attempt to give the artist the freedom to realize his ideas without any restricting factors. This is why the curators of exhibition have relied on the artists who managed to retain their independence during the previous, most difficult years. Despite the common political background, the situation in art has differed in many respects in the three Baltic states. We still belong to different cultural areas. All these differences are reflected in "Forma Anthropologica" as well. But at the moment it is the problem of the freedom of art that concerns us most. Too much politics, pathetic nationalism, business and money been dragged into art as it is, in recent years. We are living in the times of transition and we know, for the present, what the freedom 'from something' means. As the time passes, we shall learn what we wanted this freedom 'for'. "Forma Anthropologica" can serve as a possible answer.