

## ***After Emancipation - Late 90s in Lithuanian Art***

I have been speaking and writing about the 90s repeatedly. Before starting to conceive this paper, I tried to recollect my earlier discussed issues or made generalizations and decide which of them could be worth mentioning again. Finally there's only one single idea from the footnotes of the report which I made in 1996 (at the conference of the Baltic art exhibition *Personal Time* in "Zacheta" gallery in Warsaw), which I can still use: art critical generalizations are also of a transitional character. Year after year in the course of this accelerated 90s' decade, new signs marking the legitimation of contemporary art in today's cultural and social life were discovered. However, these joyful discoveries would so rapidly become a *status quo* that before finishing to elaborate some idea one would start wondering at the pathetics of the just pronounced words.

Now I will risk once more and speak about the late 90s in Lithuanian art, trying to suggest some generalizations about it as a structure getting somewhat different parameters than the pathetic 90s on the whole.

One after another - in the autumn of 1999, in the spring of 2000 and quite recently in the winter of 2001 three illustrated publications presenting contemporary Lithuanian art came out in Vilnius. The first is a catalogue of the exhibition *Lithuanian Art 1989 - 1999. The Ten Years* held in the Contemporary Art Center of Vilnius. The second - *100 Contemporary Lithuanian Artists* compiled from the documentation accumulated in the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts. The catalogue, published by the CAC, was assessed by the majority as a more discursive one - the artists and their works were selected on the principle which enabled to shape the model of contemporary Lithuanian art close to the familiar Western standard. The SCCA publication deserved more frequent critique - the presented panorama of Lithuanian art possesses more local specificity in it (including the specificity which emerged under the extensive influence of Soviet environment). Which of the images do you favor: the déjà vu type or an exotic one? The mention of an image is not rhetoric or accidental, though. The choice of one or another image, packaging and promoting it is a characteristic tendency of the 90s, giving rise not only to Brit pop, fashionable Nordic artists or the Japanese techno exotics but also to the East European art "after the wall".

But let's come back to the third publication mentioned earlier. It's more modest - just a collection of postcards (published by the CAC, Vilnius as well) presenting the productions of Lithuanian artists in the year 2000. The set does not include any explanatory



text (as if there wasn't much to say yet). However, it is precisely this publication that reflects the point which I would like to discuss here - the late 90s.

In order to make it more pronounced I will refer to two familiar perceptions: those of Modernity and Late Modernity. And I hope to be forgiven for willfully placing them within the bounds of a single decade. The intensity of social changes witnessed by the 90s can possibly serve as a certain justification.

At the end of the 80s, when the young generation of Lithuanian artists started to radically reform their strategy, an ambition to consolidate one's identity as a representative of the Modernity became one of the major issues. The new art language, the new principles of the organization of the art life, the artists' relations with various institutions, the (dis)balance between local and international art contexts, the new character of art studies (academic training) and other novelties witnessed an ambition for a Modernity model and a wish to be its component. Modernity was intuitively perceived as a space of new identity connecting with the contemporary global world. At first some of its yet non-existing parameters were just simulated in the micro model of the art world (partially this is reflected in the activities of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts).

As the sociologists put it<sup>1</sup>, Modernity is marked by emancipatory politics. First of all it means the liberation from the clutches of tradition and habit as well as the abolition of inequality and oppression. In the spheres of politics, economy and also culture and arts, the emancipatory politics can be understood as an aspiration for the *freedom from* (something). Taking a step back - speaking about the Lithuanian intellectuals of the Soviet time - the Lithuanian philosopher of the younger generation Leonidas Donskis argues that they solely desired *freedom for*, avoiding to interpret the notion of freedom politically but rather taking it as a mere cultural category. Such perception of freedom is based on the belief in the freedom of spirit, which survives under any oppression. The mention of the freedom of spirit leads to the necessity to mention *spirituality* - one of the most popular Lithuanian myths in general. Indeed, to be an intellectual, an artist too, in Lithuania meant and to some still means today - to be spiritual. Donskis states ironically that "most probably a spiritual appearance and continuous talks about spirituality had to mean a certain linguistic-moral code for the cultural/ideological recognition in order to prevent an intellectual from getting lost and to be able to timely identify his own"<sup>2</sup> (something similar to a famous Modernist artist's barrette).

The Lithuanian artists of the 60s-80s strove for the *freedom for*: being able to create abstract art or assemblage, to apply deformation, paint photo realistically or speak ironically - to paraphrase the prominent Lithuanian art critic Alfonsas Andriuškevičius<sup>3</sup>. These intentions were definitely apolitical and did not cross the borders of the closed territory of art (spiritual, i.e. high culture).

A different, typical of Modernity, movement towards the freedom from, active at the juncture of the 80s and 90s was embodied in the most pronounced form by the political struggle for the independence of Lithuania. At the same time the spheres of culture and art also witnessed a growing tendency towards the freedom from - first of all from the mythologization of tradition and the dominance of hierarchical structures. The new generation of artists held themselves aloof from traditions like from the previous, old condition. This is how the artist D. Narkevičius sees it: "The art of that period simply does not



exist for the new generation of artists. That period influences still in one or another way the works of the present generation. However, it is the heritage of the other historical cultural forms (technology, fashion, the code of Soviet morality, etc.) but not that of art"<sup>4</sup>.

One can say that the new strategy of Lithuanian artists has not become, as it is usually presumed, a liberation from Soviet ideologems but the liberation from the mentioned myth of spirituality which matured in the closed society and culture. This myth was seen as an embodiment of cultural non-freedom and also as an instrument of the restriction of individual's rights. The emancipatory strategy towards the *freedom from* is well featured in the Lithuanian art of the 90s, and in this exhibition too.

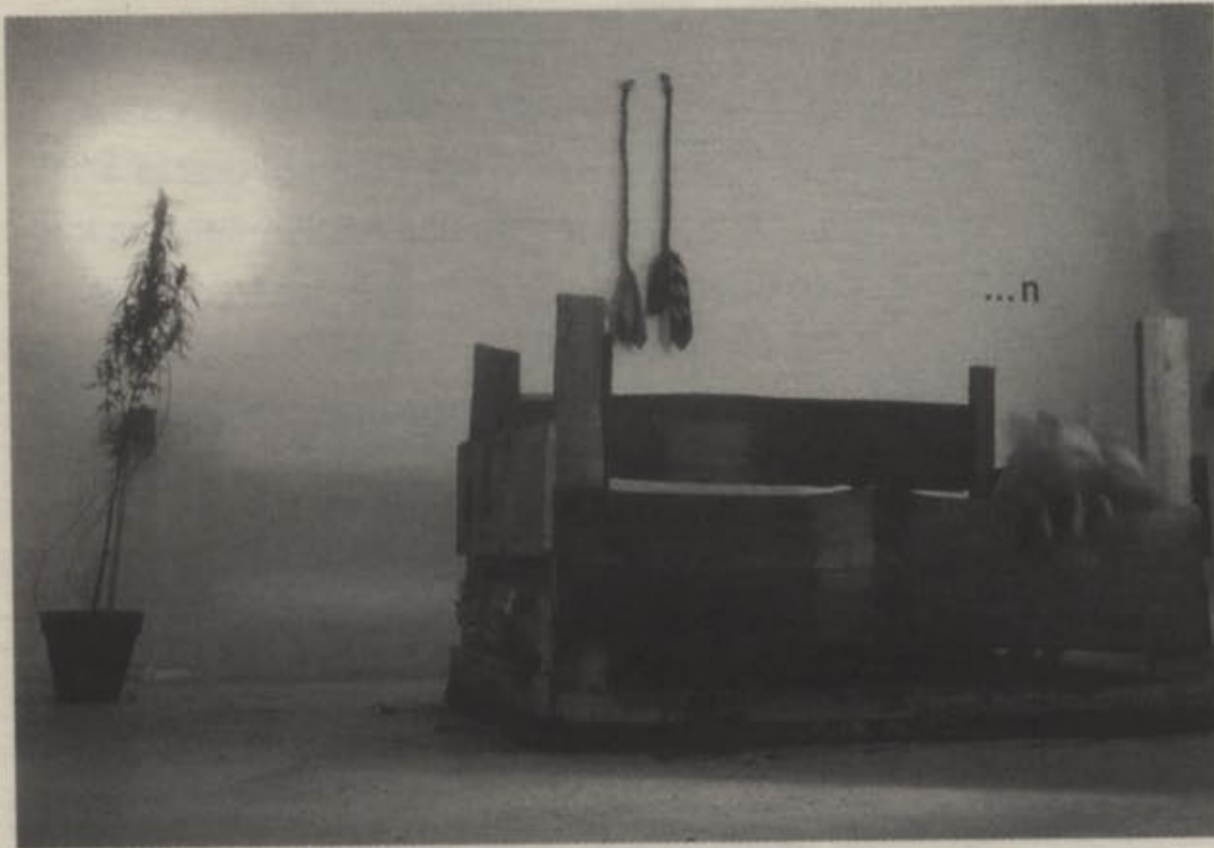
In the late 90s, emancipatory gestures were gradually going down. A number of artists' collaborations and individual artist's works witness a new direction, marginal to the context based on the contrast of opposites. It was substituted for heterogeneity, contextuality, dematerialization, fluidness, private experience and logic, etc. "As you're surfing for a radio wave signal, you run on a point where several waves merge; leaving your ears there you open several windows of Internet search engines; while browsing in *sadie plant*, *alamut.com*, *stereo and tokyo*, you have a bite from your neighbor's plate, write a novel and application, look at 57 monitors like David Bowie; as you read a book and think about four vinyl records mixed by Richie Hawtin, you dream several dreams at a time, while sleeping and not sleeping, you say several words at a time, in several languages and several times, and you don't want to continue single-serving practices though they're anachronistically romantic"<sup>5</sup>, - the young Lithuanian curator Raimundas Malasauskas presents his project *Parallel Progressions* (2000, CAC). The text of the curator describes the fluidness and the collage-type structure of the projects, which emerged in the late 90s, better than the stiff images of the art works themselves. Their content would unfold better if one tried to narrate them as stories instead of illustrating them, say, with slides.

Let us come back to the issues of Modernity, to be more precise and time related, to the Late Modernity. Its specific sign is opening to an individual of an indefinite field of potential directions for activity. Emancipatory politics is changed or substituted for decision-making policy. These decisions are constantly followed by hyperreflexiveness peculiar to Late Modernity - a constant inspection of everything one does or decides to do with new and new information and knowledge. The *Self Project*, marking the person's identity, is also reflexive. A constant interference of new information and knowledge into everything analyzed and thought creates doubt which becomes a specific methodological principle.

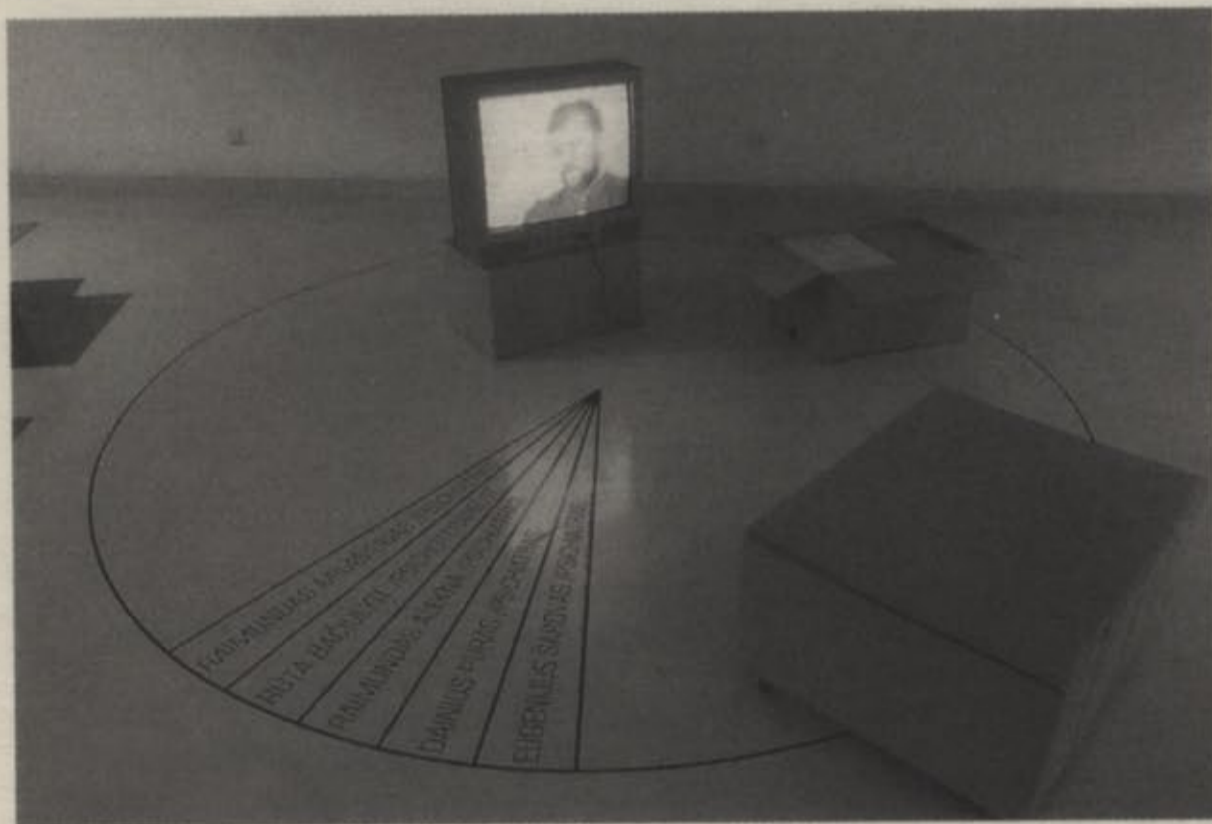
Here are some examples to compare.

In 1996 D. Narkevičius placed a mobile installation *The Chosen One* in the gallery of the CAC. It was a rubber figure dressed in the artist's authentic clothes and bearing the features of the artist himself. It hung with its head down fixed to a mechanism with the help of which the figure could have been lifted, lowered and moved forward and backward. Some days later "the artist" looked really heavily exploited and abused by the visitors. In the 2001 exhibition *Exotic* (curated by Narkevičius) the artist Artūras Raila presented the project *Participation / Vytaute*. He invited a friend, a Lithuanian artist based in London (Vytaute), to come to the exhibition at some certain time and instructed another artist (the female photographer) to make a series of snapshot





Evaldas Jansas, Morfologija umjetnosti / *Morphology of art*, 1997.  
Instalacija / *Installation*



Gediminas & Nomeda Urbonas, Transakcija / *Transaction*, 2000.  
Interdisciplinarni projekt / *Interdisciplinary project*

photos presenting Vytaute's presence in the show as the sign of A. Raila's participation in it.

In 1997 the artist Evaldas Jansas abused the Jutempus gallery by placing pigs in its space, and in 1999 - in the artists' collaboration called "tvvv.plotas" (initiated by Jutempus) the issue of relationship between artist and institution was heard in a great number of various opinions, broadcasted on the Lithuanian National TV, discussed at a videoconference and in the Internet chat.

In 1995 Eglė Rakauskaitė presented one of the most famous Lithuanian contemporary art works - the live sculpture *Trap. Expulsion from Paradise* where she raised the problem of the dependency of the female image from cultural stereotypes. The 2000 project *Transaction* done by of Gediminas and Nomeda Urbonas also deals with a "female script constructed with empathy and misogyny in the world that belongs to men"<sup>6</sup>. The work consists of three parts: interviews with Lithuanian feminists, where they tell their private stories and also point at specific female scripts in Lithuanian movies, the second part

is an archive of these movies (to be chosen by the viewer to watch) and the third part consists of commentaries by the Lithuanian psychiatrists watching the fragments of these films.

It is possible to continue this succession of comparisons between the works done with the interval of several years. And the mentioned subjects of the artist's identity, relations between the artist and institution, female representation could be complemented also by those of body, history, travel and others. One could also cross some individual artist's works separated by the same interval of years. The essence is, however, not the quantity of the late 90s' works and discourses appearing in them. Projects based



on reflexive narration, communication and discussion do not feature a completely new contemporary art language, they present a new artist strategy, which emerged *after emancipation*. It goes without saying that the choice of the title for this paper is not accidental at all. It should recall the title of the well known exhibition (*After the Wall*) and also indicate a specific place and time after it. *After emancipation* there is no separation between art and politics, individual and society, East and West, male and female (though I don't assert the possibility of the conflict between them). There exists something else - a context linked by the complex relationship of inevitable dependence. Fluidness and collage, so typical of the recent Lithuanian artists' production as well as of art projects (exhibitions tending to become screenings, presentations, collaborations), reflect this context as a live organism in action. Statements are changed into discussion, exclusiveness into participation, novelty of art language into its interaction with other contemporary means of visual expression.

The Lithuanian art of the late 90s is maybe not so attractive, but it is not exotic. It is neither local nor international - lower than local and higher than international - because it is personal, biographical. It is not easily comprehended, and hopefully due to that it can't become a new package.

1 see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 1991,

2 Leonidas Donskis, *Two Lithuanian Cultures: Collisions of Intellectuals and Intelligentsia and the Possibilities of the Future Dialogue // Between Carlisle and Klaipeda*. Critical Essays on Society and Culture, 1997, p. 101 (in Lithuanian),

3 *Semi-nonconformist Lithuanian Painting: 1956-1986 // Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, Lithuanian Art: 1975-1995*, 1997, p. 12-23 (in Lithuanian),

4 Deimantas Narkevičius // *Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, 72 Lithuanian Artists about Art*, 1998, p. 200 (in Lithuanian),

5 *Parallel Progressions*, booklet, 2000, *6 Transaction // Innocent Life*, catalogue, 2001.