

Difficult, but Never Boring

■ Difficult, but never boring - this is how I would have described the artist's as well as curator's or critic's situation in the independent Lithuania not long ago. There were many reasons to say so.

In Lithuania, a country annexed by the Soviet Union, censorship and forced isolation was more extreme and prolonged than in Poland or Czech Republic, Hungary or Croatia. At the same time the escape from the oppressive situation of the iron curtain had released vital energy accumulated for a long time and unconventional, sometimes even adventurous activity.

Such phenomena as self-reflective painting, conceptual, post-conceptual or contextual art, various media and materials in the artist's work, which had formed during decades in other countries, here became dominant within a very short time. The first curated exhibitions, as well as art outside museums and galleries in alternative spaces, emerged very soon. Not only artists, but critics as well could not always differentiate between a reconstruction or quotation and authentic creation in this euphoria of catching up.

As in independent pre-war Lithuania, many young artists stay in Western art centres for long or short periods after their studies at home. However, now they receive grants not only from the state, but also from various foundations in other countries.

The new generation of artists have become not only observers of developments in Western art, transforming them more or less originally, but also active creators of these processes, participating in big or small manifestations of contemporary art. Time at home and abroad coincides for the first time.

In comparison to the pre-war Lithuania, contemporary Lithuanian art and photography are far more demonstrated in group exhibitions in other countries. The image is even more positive if you look at the cultural chronicles of the events arriving from abroad. Contemporary art, films and performances are shown or contemporary music is performed not much less often in Vilnius and partially in Kaunas, than in the much richer centres of Scandinavia. One cannot complain about the lack of the audience either.

However, this optimistic image is deceptive, for the Transition State has been continuing throughout the decade. Hyperactivity became symbiotic with complete stagnation. We appear to be unable to solve strategically important as well as repetitive everyday tasks.

Throughout the decade, the effort to establish the museum of contemporary art was expressed only in empty rhetoric or imitating activities. Differently from the pre-war independent Lithuania, the state now does not acquire works of contemporary art. Even in Soviet times the situation was better. The art market did not emerge either, only private galleries rent their premises for low prices and then re-rent them for the artists' exhibitions for much higher prices or the latter have to pay by donating their works. Who is interested in selling art in a civilised manner in such conditions?



Artūras Raila, *Pod zastavom / Under the Flag*, 2000.
Video

The situation in high art schools is even sadder. No serious reforms ever took place here. Many leaders of socialist realism are still teaching. Most programmes have changed very little, and the heating in winter in the classrooms is only to keep the pipes from freezing.

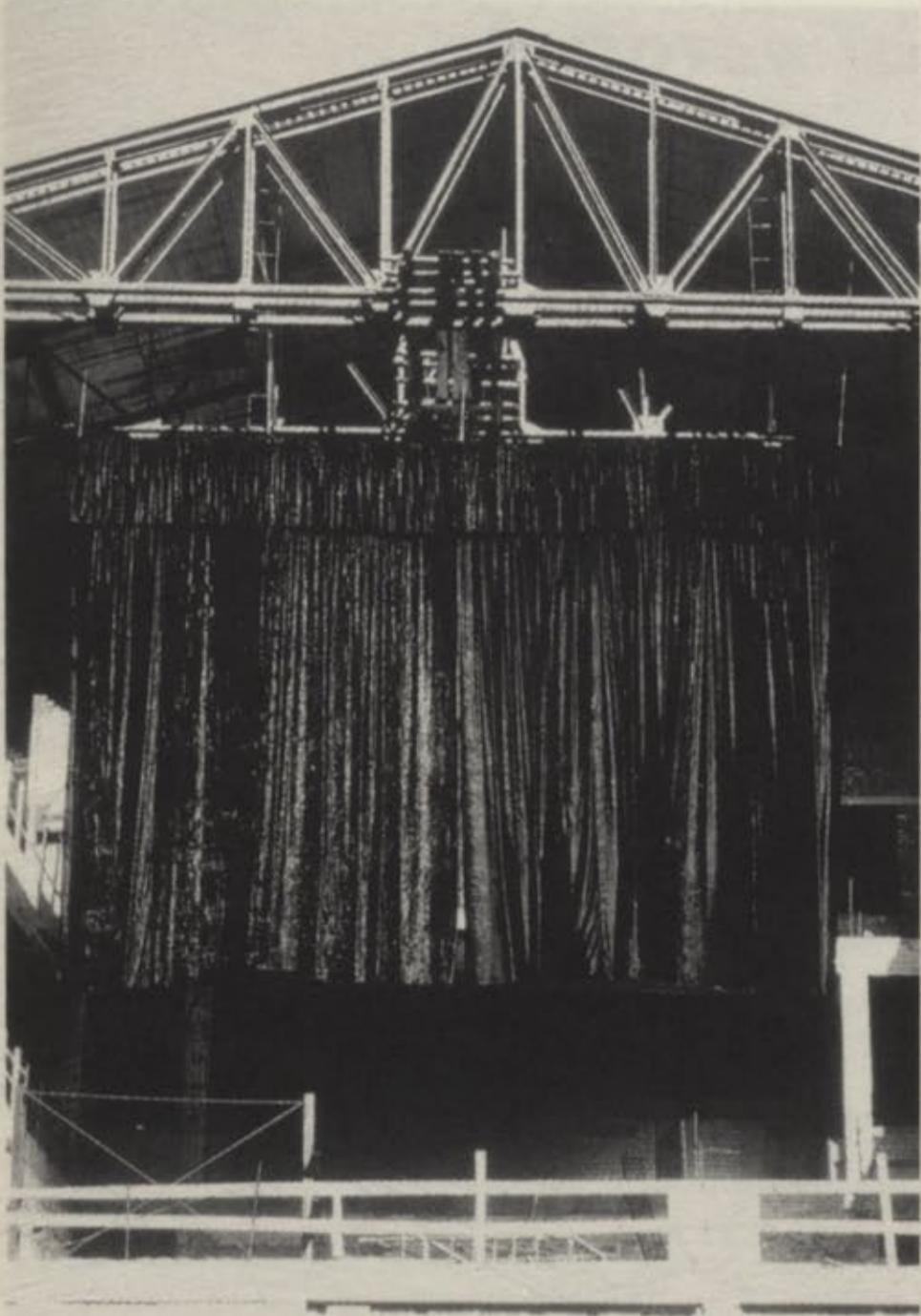
Most positions in the art institutions, except the constantly changing ministers of culture, have not experienced the change of the leaders or decentralisation. Even new, younger and progressive leaders of state museums or exhibition houses seem to continue that sacred tradition of the permanent

position. The artists, who work in such institutions as curators, do not restrain from exhibiting themselves as the new classics.

The worst thing is that society, not only artists and intellectuals, has put up with these disasters and peculiarities as well as with other, much more important evils of the new free state like with the unavoidable change of the seasons. I am afraid that one day it will become not only difficult, but also boring to follow this route. However, such an indeterminate and paradoxical state of "Eurasia" in the very geographical centre of Europe is still the unending source of fresh and sharp motives at least for art.

Time in the "newest" history of Lithuania and Croatia hasn't become synchronised. Young artists who started just a decade ago - Deimantas Narkevičius, Gediminas Urbonas, Artūras Raila, Svajone and Paulius Stanikas, Česlovas Lukenskas, Darius Bastys, Eglė Rakauskaitė and the Academic Training Group had very little to lean on in the "Lithuanian school", for it had different traditions. The strength of contemporary Lithuanian art has been expressive realism and monochrome painting, in colourist painting and archetype, monumental language of sculpture.

The young artists have chosen mixed media and mentors from abroad. They do not dissolve in the conditions of the global art of mass communications only because they feed on the situation here and now in Lithuania. One of the central themes in the Lithuanian cultural tradition is the mechanisms developed throughout ages of how to escape from the uncomfortable and unwanted reality to the mythical archetype images.



Gintaras Makarevičius, *Zastor / Curtain*,
Vilnius, 1995.

Instalacija / Installation

the sound and editing is unprofessional. The painful social facts are presented without any analysis. I think the viewer, who is far away from our realities, might not understand this social diagnosis. When reality with its all attributes is moved to art, it also requires a deciphering by the imagination.

The relationship to this power of self-deception and danger connects such different works as Eglė Rakauskaitė's live sculpture *Trap: Expulsion from Paradise* (1995), Artūras Raila's sculpture *The Cradle Ensuring the Pragmatic Infertility* (1994), Svajone and Paulius Stanikas' video *Two Women* (2000), installation by the Academic Training Group *Caught in Lithuania* (1997), Deimantas Narkevičius's film *Europe 54°54' - 25°19'*. The plaited hair of the teenage girls become the traps of pain (Rakauskaitė), the metal cradle rocks but does not protect (Raila). The dramatically elegiac dance with the flag is for a moment interrupted by a vulgar fight of beggars (Stanikas). The group with Lithuanian ethnographic costumes come out to be the refugees from the Middle East, who have tried to cross the border illegally on their way westwards (ATG). The centre of Europe is the road to the dreary, poor wilderness (Narkevičius).

These works are effective because they are full of reality, but they also preserve an unsaid, characteristic to poetry. The situation is different when the artists take over the means of a journalist, for instance Artūras Raila in his video *The Girl is Innocent* (1999). It is authentic and indiscreet with regard to the right to privacy like much contemporary Lithuanian journalism. The image is blurred,