

Rethinking Art Exchanges – Towards a European Foreign Cultural Policy

Import – Export – Exchange

Economy and Ideology of Visual Arts Exchange Processes in Lithuania

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1. Contemporary Art Information Centre (CAIC) of the Lithuanian Art Museum (LAM)

This institution has a similar history as the Latvian and Estonian Centres for Contemporary Art in Riga and Tallinn. All three were established in the beginning of the 1990s by the Soros (Open Society) Foundations in the respective countries and by the end of the decade spun off these mother institutions. From the start of its activities the CAIC accumulates the archive of information about contemporary Lithuanian artists (a couple of hundred files have been compiled to this day), facilitates local and international curators' and art critics' research in Lithuania, takes part in visual arts exchange and networking projects. Starting with the year 2000 CAIC operates within the Lithuanian Art Museum as its subdivision. It continues its earlier activities: accumulates and provides information about contemporary Lithuanian art, coordinates and manages participation of Lithuanian artists in various international projects, curates and organizes exhibitions of Lithuanian art abroad. To mention a few, CAIC commissioned the first Lithuanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1999) and commissions one in 2005 as well, presented Lithuanian artists at the Arnolfini contemporary art center in Bristol (2000), collaborated in the preparation of the Baltic art exhibition "The Baltic Times" in the Modern Art Museum in Zagreb (2001), co-organized exhibitions of contemporary Lithuanian art in Frankfurter Kunstverein and the Artist's House, Moscow (2002), Bunkier sztuki, Krakow, Tallin Art Hall and the Estonian Art Museum (2004), etc. A new sphere of the CAIC activities is the implementation of the concept of the new National Art Gallery (modern and contemporary art museum) in Vilnius (the gallery will open in 2007; it will house a permanent exposition of the 20th–21st c. Lithuanian art that will be complemented with temporary international and local exhibitions as well as specially commissioned art projects' program). While preparing for the opening of the new museum CAIC also acts as a platform of discussions on various issues concerning contemporary museum discourse and practice. A series of international conferences have been held on these topics: e.g. "Modern Art Museum: from Idea to Realization" (1999), "Modern and Contemporary Art Museums – Functions, Duties, Conflicts" (2004).

2. Infrastructure of the visual arts exchange in Lithuania

I will speak here about two art institutions strongly involved in the visual arts exchange in Lithuania; both of them function in Vilnius, the capital city. The said Contemporary Art Information Centre (CAIC) mostly curates and coordinates “export” projects, i.e. its main concern is the promotion of the Lithuanian art outside the country. These projects are either state commissioned – the center implements parts of the state program of the visual arts exchange (CAIC takes part in competitions for commissioning the Lithuanian pavilion in the Venice biennale, contributes to special projects, like the program of Lithuania the guest country at the International Frankfurt Book Fair) – or originated by the centre itself through its well established institutional contacts. In this respect the activities of the CAIC remind the functions of the International program at the Moderna museet in Stockholm.

Another important contemporary art institution in Lithuania is the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) of Vilnius. Contrarily to the CAIC it mostly “imports” international art projects to Lithuania. Every year the Centre presents 6 to 11 foreign art shows in its galleries; this number was growing from the beginning of the 90s till now. Three main types of exhibitions can be specified: 1) traveling exhibitions, prepared by official cultural institutes of various countries (IFA, The British Council, AFAA, etc.) and foreign art institutions (museums, art centres, etc.). These projects mainly aim at the principal spaces and audiences in the Lithuanian capital – the CAC or the biggest museums – however, people in the province rarely have an opportunity to see them in their home towns; 2) projects which are conceived by way of direct collaboration of the CAC and art institutions in other countries. These projects usually function as an exchange of exhibitions. CAC has organized exhibition exchange with art institutions in Norway, The Netherlands, Iceland, Russia and other countries; 3) international art projects initiated by the CAC itself. In the course of several recent years namely these exhibitions constitute the strategic core of the CAC program. Artists invited by the Centre either produce special works or at least adapt the already existing ones to the actual space of the CAC as well as to the local context in the expanded sense. Among the most successful solo shows of this type projects by U. Rückriem, P. Bismuth and J. Monk, J. Penalva, A. Mik and other should be mentioned. The most ambitious international group exhibition that the CAC implements is the Baltic Triennial for Contemporary Art (organized again in 2005).

A closer look at the response to these various projects in Lithuanian media proves that traveling shows get least of reflexive thinking. Journalists and art critics settle for the basic information about them which leads to actually non-achieving or only partly-achieving of the goals of international exchange – not just “exporting” but sharing and participating above all. Most interest goes to the above mentioned third type of exhibition projects: the specially commissioned and locally grounded ones. I sincerely believe

that this is the future of the international collaboration in the field of visual arts on the whole.

3. Economy

Strictly speaking there is no structurally funded and centrally administrated visual arts exchange program in Lithuania. The Lithuanian Institute, established in 2001, now coordinates most of the state commissioned cultural projects that often include visual arts' programs too (e.g. Lithuania the guest country in the festival "Les Boreales" in Caen, France, 2003 or in the Gotheburg book fair, Sweden, 2005). All three mentioned institutions: CAIC, CAC and the Lithuanian Institute often compete for funding of their initiated projects in the one and only Lithuanian Fund for Culture and Sports, supporting the representation of Lithuanian art abroad. The Foreign Relations' Department of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture is mainly concerned with projects intended in cultural collaboration agreements between Lithuania and other states. The Ministry of Culture supports the biggest and most prestigious projects of international representation: though the Venice biennale is the only one supported regularly among the visual arts projects.

Economical reasons determine the dominance of the "imported" projects over the "exported" ones in Lithuania. Local institutions are not yet economically strong; not without similar reasons many of the institutions restrain from the participation in European cooperation projects (like Culture2000).

4. Regionalism

It is but natural that institutions operate not only in the local, national and the widest international but also in a particular regional context. Regional cooperation is often based on traditionally, historically existing links between countries, but as often as not they reflect new tendencies of regionalization based on economical factors. To mention a few examples, the CAIC through the 1990s has extensively and very productively cooperated in East and Central Europe: a network of contemporary art institutions was built and a number of interesting exchange projects implemented. With the withdrawal of the Soros Foundations from the contemporary arts sector, however, the collaboration weakened. Fruitful cooperation united the Baltic and Nordic countries during the 1990s. The favorable political and economical conditions in this region gave rise to a number of networks, institutional collaboration projects and other manifestations of common cultural interests in the Nordic/Baltic space. The Contemporary Art Center of Vilnius has organized several important exhibitions of Nordic artists in its premises. Last but not least I would like to mention the third "imaginary region" that emerged in 2004 – that of the new expanded Europe. A large number of exhibitions representing contemporary art from the new European countries were organized through this year (CAIC alone took part in provid-

ing information and managing the Lithuanian participation in at least four of them), confirming the somewhat excessive closeness of politics and art today.

5. Perspectives

By my opinion the future of visual arts exchange lies in the direct collaboration between professional art institutions, art organizations more than in building new administrative networks (as already a number of them have been established and function well). Artists' mobility and new art production should be more encouraged than traveling exhibitions and exchange of packaged information. I strongly believe that East and Central Europe is not any more a *terra incognita* or a bizarre utopian/distopian dream for the rest of the world. I advocate for locally bound projects that refuse to eroticize The Other.