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## **From the Soviet Exhibition Palace to the Contemporary Art Centre: Cultural Democratisation or Elitist Enclosure?**

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The social changes of the last half century has put the issue of public access to art on the research agenda and made education in museums a matter for reflection and study. What happens when a new cultural project – a contemporary art gallery – is placed in a post-communist country?<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects on the emerging agenda for cultural education in Lithuania's Contemporary Art Centre in the context of the country's re-independence.

The end of the two ideological blocks and the re-independence of the former Soviet republics made way for the globalisation of the capitalist system and the spread of its forms of cultural production and sociocultural features. The mobility of people and the exchange of capital and ideas has resulted in major transformations in all areas, including radical changes in the artistic paradigm which gives rise to new art institutions.

*'The sweeping changes that occurred during the relatively short period affected not only the dominant art trends, artistic idioms, and generations of artists, but also art institutions, art criticism, the art market, and, finally, the audience of contemporary art'* (Kuizinas,

Occupying the former Soviet Palace of Exhibition (figure 1), dedicated to the Socialist Realism and propaganda, this museum was transformed into a Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), a non-collection based institution, a 'white cube' (Trilupaitytė & Jablonskienė, 2007) or even into a 'black box' – due to the strong investment in video art.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on an on-going Ph.D. research project which questions how the same global and regional trends are *translated* into local educational strategies, programmes, disclosures and social-pedagogical practices in cultural institutions.

Western museums have seen a shift from emphasis on the object – acquisition and conservation – to emphasis on audiences and their enjoyment and learning. What is the role of this new institution, dedicated to contemporary art, in a post-communist country? How, if at all, has this institution addressed its educational role? Has CAC challenged the fears of Lithuanian society towards globalisation and Europeanisation (Samalavicius, 2005)?



FIGURE 1 - CAC

The *glasnost* put in place by Gorbachev allowed the opening of communications with the outer world, and later on the domino-like series of 1989 revolutions created the conditions for the re-independence of the former Soviet republics. Kęstutis Kuizinas (2001), CAC director, in the *Arts of the Baltic* sets out three sub-periods to analyse the transition period in Lithuania. He argues that CAC was born with re-independence, during the 'Revival' period (1988-91), in the midst of chaotic ideological struggles, political challenges and economic difficulties, but also artistic experimentation which shaped the gallery's identity.

On the one hand, the new museum provoked a confrontation of ideological attitudes of the past in the form of a struggle between the old and new generation of artists – an artificial division between artists who produced their work under the protection and guidelines of the Artists Union and those working outside of this structure. On the other hand, the rapid introduction of a contemporary art aesthetic forced an uncomfortable shift in the interpretation practices of the already established Soviet Palace of Exhibition's local audience. Both of these tensions will be stressed in the following discussion – *upstream* with the artists and *downstream* with the local audience.

### Upstream with the artists

In order to follow Western standards for a contemporary art gallery, the interior of the Lithuanian architect Vytautas Čekanauskas' building was transformed into a 'white cube'. The walls were painted white, the floor was covered by a homogeneous grey surface and the technical and security equipment was minimized. This transformation fired intense discussions about cultural policy reforms, the definition of contemporary art and mainly the role of this state funded art institution.



FIGURE 2 – CAC INTERIOR TRANSFORMATION

Two responses were as follows, the first from a journalist, and the second from an academic:

*'Contemporary art is art by talented professional artists of various styles and generations who currently work. Nearly 1300 artists, 270 photography artists and 30 members of the interdisciplinary arts association make up 1600 creative artists who have a right to display their work. The analysis of CAC exhibitions reveal that they consider about 30 artists as members of the club. As we saw from the Emission cycle presented last year, only half of them created valuable art. The protectionism of just 2% of artists is obvious. The absolute monopolist sounds rather cynical when stating a lack of competition, smaller galleries and alternative art stages.'* (Ramunė Vėliuviene, *Literatura ir menas*, March 2005)

*'The walls were made 'white cube' white suddenly when the exhibition space was repainted at the very beginning, the name of the institution was changed, a new logo was created, minimal equipment was sorted out, different traditions of exhibition openings were initiated - which was perceived as something very unexpected [...] because all this contrasted precisely with what 'was before.'* (Trilupaitytė & Jablonskienė, 2007: 13-15)

However, both authors stressed that transforming the Exhibition Palace into a white cube was not the most controversial change, as the building's main architectural characteristics were left intact; the problem was the sudden and radical opening of CAC to the international art world, to their aesthetic languages and exhibitions practices. The concept of a curated exhibition. meant the loss of the Artists' Union members' privileged role in the selection of which art was accessible to the local audiences. Prior to this, they had had exclusive access to the exhibition spaces, state commissions and art materials (Kuizinas, 2001). As Kuizinas made clear, in Soviet Lithuania the artist-experts and the Artists' Union had the final word on what was or was not exhibited. Space and opportunity were provided to all the union members to display their work; large, official group and state-supported exhibitions of a variety of genres were common. The CAC Director, in interview, describes the exhibition criteria:

*'Quantity was very important at that time – when I took it over from the last director, it was 72 exhibitions a year! 72 exhibitions! Nobody believed me when I said that. [...] it was like a line, a queue – people were submitting their proposals. Actually it was even not proposal; it was like you ask for something: 'I ask you to give me the opportunity to exhibit my works in this hall from this date to that date. I'll show 27 paintings of that type. I have an anniversary – a good reason to show them – my mum is 50 years old...'*

In this sense there was a shift to curatorial-driven exhibitions and gallery organisation, creating a conflict that is still visible today. The CAC building is

divided in two, one part is the CAC and the other is the Lithuanian Artists' Association (LAA)<sup>2</sup>.

It is not surprising that CAC focuses its attention on the younger generation of artists that were producing their work free from Soviet constraints. The LAA members, more attached to an ethic that keeps them out of a competitive art market, continued to focus on (what was perceived as) the Lithuanian inter-war aesthetics and local traditions – a way of rebuilding national identity. (Trilupaitytė, 2005). Therefore the globalisation of the Lithuanian art world, spearheaded by the CAC and the young generation of artists, was perceived under this nationalist ideology as a betrayal and not as an inevitable process of opening Lithuania to the rest of the world.

### **Downstream with the audience**

The second tension was with the audience. As Kuizinas (2001: 357) suggests, a local audience used to seeing 'beautiful stuff' tended to share the artistic judgment criteria of the older generation of artists. The quality of an artwork was judged by the intensity of its content and the artist's skill in representing the 'fundamental spiritual values in art'.

*'In the Soviet times it was kind of traditional art – on Sundays, on Saturdays with children the whole family they go to the exhibition centres. They go to the museums and they find, and they find beautiful pictures there. And all of the sudden the form changes, also ugly things, you don't find sometimes any kind of craft in there, and you don't understand where the art is, the common question is: 'Sorry, but where is the art?'" - CAC Public Relations*

The interaction of a contemporary art aesthetic and everyday life is paradoxical. On the one hand, art is concerned with issues of its time that affect daily life; on the other hand it is often perceived as hermetic and strange. Who in a contemporary art gallery has never thought or heard: *'What is that? I could do*

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<sup>2</sup> After the Lithuanian re-independence the Artists' Union was transformed into the Lithuanian Artists' Association.

*that myself. That is rubbish!*' In Lithuania, the changes were introduced rapidly and belatedly. Movements, art forms and ideas that emerged in Europe and North America in 1968, came to Lithuania in the 1990s with the introduction of happenings, performances, installations and video, all of which challenged Socialist Realism.

In the Soviet era, non-representative art was considered decadent, unintelligible to the proletariat and above all counter-revolutionary – anti-Communist in principle. Socialist Realism was established as the official style, an art form to represent the party interests, and the only one allowed from 1934 to *glasnost*. Socialist Realism represented the life of the worker as admirable – happy, muscular peasants and workers in factories and *kolkhozes* (collective farms). Industrial and agricultural landscapes were also popular subjects, glorifying the achievements of the Soviet economy, but also contributing to the creation of a new kind of person – the *New Soviet Man*<sup>3</sup> (Gutkin, 1999). As the Statute of the Union of Soviet Writers stated:

*'It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of Socialism.'* (Struve, 1951: 245).

In this way artists were considered 'engineers of the human soul.' Irina Gutkin (1999) argues the Socialist Realist aesthetic was used as a psycho-engineering tool to foster the creation of the 'new man' and to promote the revolution. In Soviet society there was a suppression of the market; artists were only commissioned by the state, becoming state employees. This context, allied with a rigorous censorship policy - Siberia was on their doorstep - strongly

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<sup>3</sup> The New Soviet Man, as postulated by the ideologists of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was an archetype of a person with certain qualities that were said to be emerging as dominant among all citizens of the Soviet Union. The New Soviet Man should be selfless, learned, healthy and enthusiastic in spreading the socialist Revolution; adherence to Marxism-Leninism, and individual behaviour consistent with that party philosophy's prescriptions.

discouraged artists from taking a critical or dissident position and there was a lack of alternative or underground art.

*'At that time I remember the visitors, we had a group during the first day of my career which was a group of American curators [...] and I told them: 'We're changing the name of the institution to the Contemporary Art Centre. I'm not sure if we have it – the contemporary art in our country – but we gonna make it, we gonna make contemporary art here.'* - CAC Director

In terms of formal schooling, the art history curricula have not been updated in order to teach children the *grammar* of contemporary art: *'We have art from the very beginning till the end [school]. And there you have art that ends somewhere in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the contemporary art is not developed. So, that means, you don't learn any grammar how to approach, how to understand, what tools should be used for discovery.'* - CAC Public Relations

### **Youth Culture**

The CAC has been investing in one approach which privileges a specific audience – young, urban and art-specialised. This audience has been already seduced by the CAC atmosphere, which is that of an 'international drop-in zone for artists, critics, curators, musicians, and writers many of whom have become 'friends of the CAC'' (Kuizinas & Fomina, 2007: 5).

*'In the beginning of the 90's, I think the contemporary art exhibitions had mixed audiences, very curious about what that all was. Then, I think, some part of the audience stood back because of their lack of education. Imagine people felt a little bit left out in Mars. Its audience there has always been a young audience and it was always the priority of the CAC. When I'm speaking of the young audience, I mean students, you know? And young professionals [...] So it's also the way of communication there, integrating modern and contemporary music in there and other modern stuff in it. So all of this helped to get the young audience which (in my opinion, you know, somebody could argue that) was there not because they understood what the contemporary art is or what it is about but because of the atmosphere.* - Lolita Trilupaitytė



The CAC organizational structure is made up of the director of the institution and two assistant directors, a team of six curators, a designer and a Public Relations officer, who is also one of the curators. There is a finance and a technical department. The CAC has no dedicated education department or regular education programme. Curators are responsible for putting an exhibition together, from researching the artist to writing the press release. It is part of the curator's job to create the interface or encounters between the audience and an art project, if he or she considers that to be important. It is possible for an exhibition to



FIGURE 2 - CAC READING ROOM

have no education activities and very spartan labels; in other cases, the public talks series might be as much part of the exhibition as the art works on display. It all comes down to the curatorial criteria. Gallery education practices could be summed up as an adult-orientated Public Programme consisting of exhibition tours, talks, vernissages, catalogue publication and a quarterly bi-lingual art magazine called *CAC Interviu*. In 2009 one of the exhibition rooms was transformed into a specialised library and archive – CAC Reading Room. **These types of activities appear to focus on the needs of art world professionals and students, rather than a wider public of families, children or those uninitiated into the arts.** (figure 2). The CAC Public Programme could be analysed as a *horizontal strategy*, in which gallery professionals share their learning process and interests with the gallery audience. Taking the Reading Room project as an example:

*‘For all of us the Reading Room it is a project that is very interesting, because you can self-educate. So we order a lot of books and magazines that we wanted to order. I would order myself some of them...’* (CAC Curator).

*‘I’m waiting for the moment when I will be sited here as a researcher and not as a CAC curator, reading those books, getting to know what we should have been*

*knowing long ago but we didn't have that possibility. I think that is very very important'* (CAC Public Relations)

In other words, the curatorial team put a set of activities together that they themselves would attend. As Featherstone (1991) reminds us, *cultural intermediaries* – evoking Pierre Bourdieu's concept – are a particular type of new petite bourgeoisie - professionals associated with the cultural sector with distinctive tastes and practices. Therefore, despite the fact that there is a Public Programme, it still is targeting a narrow range of the local audience.

As the Portuguese sociologist Alexandre Melo states, a contemporary art centre is a representation of the art world's specific and restricted social circuit. Typically an art centre is a cosmopolitan entity, shaped by cultural intermediaries who inhabit it locally, but who also have a presence in trans-national spaces – galleries, centres, museums – or events – 'vernissages', show-rooms, auctions – which 'tend to appear culturally homogeneous and geographically interchangeable' (Melo, 1992) while creating a seductive atmosphere.

The 'youth cult' promoted by the CAC is a central aspect of its identity, not just attracting a younger audience, but also working preferentially with young artists. The Baltic Triennial is the only recycled Soviet event, reinforcing the CAC's tradition of showing emerging art and being, until 2009<sup>4</sup>, the only venue for international exchange and the only showplace for contemporary art. In the 1990s CAC had become mainly a hosting venue for Western travelling exhibitions and a career-launching exhibition space for local artists, with the support of international organisations such as the British Council and the Soros Foundation (Kęstutis Kuizinas, 2001). The close collaboration between the gallery and this young generation of artists<sup>5</sup> was critical for the CAC's reputation and international recognition<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In July 2009 a National Gallery, dedicated to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century's art has opened.

<sup>5</sup> This strategy is not exclusive from CAC, indeed can be consider common of the art world's peripheral centres. Considering our other two case-studies, this strategy is similar to the one used on the Serralves' collection construction – '*catch them at the last moment when you still can afford*'. With low budgets

In the absence of a museum and a national collection of contemporary art, CAC took over the mission of fostering contemporary art and introducing international artists and their work to the city, as well as creating conditions for local artists to show their work overseas. Despite the fact that CAC played the role of an 'imaginary museum with a symbolic collection' (Trilupaitytė, 2005) it has always been conscious of its identity as a gallery in permanent alignment with the contemporary, showing art works that attest to its 'contemporariness.' It seems that CAC's image as a window toward the West and a source of cultural legitimisation was crucial for the gallery's local recognition.

*Sometimes we even get calls from 'commercial' people who don't even know very well what we do, they still have that understanding that CAC is nice, good place which has cool image. And for example, they wanted to rent our spaces for something – It's some kind of prestige.'* (CAC Public Relations Curator).

*We have always been associated with something which has been, I don't know, trendy or new. There's some kind of attraction that: 'If you go there, you will find something strange, maybe you won't understand, but you'll feel a bit of it [...]'* (CAC Director).

## **Final thoughts**

The CAC's transformation of the Soviet Artist's Union Exhibition Hall into a Western style gallery has created resistance on the part of both artists and audience. Such resistance is common in rupture moments. However, there is another way of understanding the resistance to museum education practices. During the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, a programme was implemented by

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these galleries aim to be part of the international circuits of arts by supporting the emerging young artists before they are caught by the so called 'gate keepers', such as the Tate Gallery, or by the market.

<sup>6</sup> In the Frieze Art Fair 2009 CAC was invited to be the year's partner institutions. Curators Kęstutis Kuizinas and Simon Rees have commissioned artist Mindaugas Navakas to create *Smash the Windows*, *Snatch the Crystals*, made from window frames and panes recently removed from the CAC.

In the 54th Venice Biennale (2011) the CAC was awarded with a Special Mention by the curatorial work of the CAC Director Kęstutis Kuizinas, and the artists Darius Mikšys on the Lithuanian National Pavilion entitled *Behind the White Curtain*.

the State to bring art closer to non-art audiences. Part of this programme consisted of artists being sent to factories and *kolkhozes* to meet ordinary people and work with them; a network, of so-called Soviet Houses of Culture was created. The aim of Soviet Houses of Culture was not to reinforce local community, raise awareness or genuinely educate, but to control people's leisure and private life through their cultural practice (Dovydaitytė, s/d). If in the West, museum education is associated with positive ideas of improving visual literacy, fostering creativity, community-building, Soviet cultural education was associated with State control. In this sense resistance to museum education is understandable.

In its drive to modernise, CAC has focused its attention on the relatively closed circle of the international art world, constantly striving to keep in step with contemporary art and society, courting young artists, provoking changes in the curriculum of the Academy and changes in art criticism. Along the way, it seems that the cultural education of the local audience has been somewhat neglected. It may be that in the long run CAC will enable more direct relationships between artist and audience, artworks and daily life, and ultimately make possible a better balance between global events and local interpretations. However, one might still ask: is it a process of culture democratisation or elitist enclosures?

## Notes

1 THIS PAPER IS BASED ON AN ONGOING PHD RESEARCH PROJECT WHICH QUESTIONS HOW THE SAME GLOBAL AND REGIONAL TRENDS ARE TRANSLATED INTO LOCAL EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES, PROGRAMMES, DISCLOSURES AND SOCIAL-PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS.

2 AFTER THE LITHUANIAN RE-INDEPENDENCE THE ARTISTS' UNION WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE LITHUANIAN ARTISTS' ASSOCIATION.

3 THE NEW SOVIET MAN, AS POSTULATED BY THE IDEOLOGISTS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION, WAS AN ARCHETYPE OF A PERSON WITH CERTAIN QUALITIES THAT WERE SAID TO BE EMERGING AS DOMINANT AMONG ALL CITIZENS OF THE SOVIET UNION. THE NEW SOVIET MAN SHOULD BE SELFLESS, LEARNED, HEALTHY AND ENTHUSIASTIC IN

SPREADING THE SOCIALIST REVOLUTION, ADHERE TO MARXISM-LENINISM, AND DISPLAY INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR CONSISTENT WITH THAT PARTY'S PHILOSOPHY.

4 In July 2009 a national gallery, dedicated to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century's art has opened.

5 This strategy is not exclusive to CAC, indeed it can be considered common to the art world's peripheral centres. This strategy is similar to the one used on the Serralves' collection construction – 'catch them at the last moment when you still can afford'. With low budgets these galleries aim to be part of the international circuits of art by supporting emerging young artists before they are caught by the so called 'gate keepers', such Tate, or by the market.

6 In the Frieze Art Fair 2009 CAC has invited to be the year's partner institutions. Curators Kęstutis Kuizinas and Simon Rees have commissioned artist Mindaugas Navakas to create smash the windows, snatch the crystals, made from window frames and panes recently removed from the CAC.

IN THE 54TH VENICE BIENNALE (2011) THE CAC WAS AWARDED WITH A SPECIAL MENTION FOR THE CURATORIAL WORK OF THE CAC DIRECTOR KĘSTUTIS KUIZINAS, AND THE ARTISTS DARIUS MIKŠYS ON THE LITHUANIAN NATIONAL PAVILION ENTITLED BEHIND THE WHITE CURTAIN.

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