



Giedre Jankeviciute

The art critic as art historian and sociologist

The Lithuanian experience

In the current "crisis of criticism", the art critic has become obsolete. The type of criticism offered "does not interest those artists who have mastered the most novel means of expression and who themselves offer interpretations of their works. It is not needed by the lovers of art, since it is uninformative and despotic, requiring from its reader total and unconditional obedience, while at the same time limiting the reader's horizon to one narrow group of artistic phenomena. It does not provide one with the criteria that would enable one to form an autonomous judgement concerning the value, context, and so on, of the art that it presents."

In the forum of art critics devoted to analyzing the functions of art criticism in the contemporary world, I would like to offer some comments on a specific case that I have had the opportunity to observe first hand for a number of years. I shall discuss the situation of art criticism in Lithuania during the last two decades. It is the situation that formed under the conditions of a major cultural shift that took place in Lithuania beginning in the late 1980s, as it broke away from Soviet domination and re-entered the cultural "gravitational field" of the West. I'd like to maintain that this situation is important because some of its features reveal, in a condensed manner, the problems that are also relevant to other countries — to the countries that have deeper and more consistent cultural traditions. In other words, I think this situation might be relevant to us all.

In order to describe the initial assumptions of my paper, I would like to quote my well-known compatriot George (Jurgis) Maciunas. Seeking to explain what *fluxus* is, he affirmed: "If people could learn to take the 'art attitude' toward all everyday phenomena, artists could stop making works of art." This is precisely the view of art that one has in mind when proclaiming "the end of art" or "the end of art criticism". Nevertheless, I would suggest that this view is rather too narrow, for the object of art criticism does not limit itself merely to explaining, assessing, and advertising the most recent visual works of art. Art critics also function as the interpreters of exhibitions of historical art, whereby they influence the formation of the viewing public's value criteria and set the guidelines for contemporary curation and museum management.

Perhaps one could only concede the point that professionals do indeed consider this latter kind of art criticism as less significant and somehow second-rate practice. The contemporary hierarchy of values suggests that the art critic *par excellence* is the one who works alongside an artist, being simultaneously the artist's alter ego and his or her manager. Fortunately, in the majority of countries that adhere to western culture, these two kinds of art criticism successfully co-exist. Thus, distinct public functions are fulfilled, and normal

communicative space is built up which allows various kinds of art to function in society side-by-side. This equilibrium is extremely important. Being acquainted with traditional art and being able to form a value judgement about it not only widens human perspectives and provides one with specific items of knowledge, but also helps to educate tastes and to develop the ability to discern beautiful and well-made things, buildings, and views from appalling and ugly ones. When this equilibrium is destroyed, society rushes headlong into extremes. This is precisely what has been happening in Lithuania for the past fifteen years.

The transformation of the political system and of social life that took place in Lithuania in the 1980s and 1990s had a substantial impact on the understanding of art. A new hierarchy, and also a new structure of values, established themselves in the spheres of art creation and consumption. The artists who had gained recognition during the Soviet era were at first almost entirely relegated to the periphery of public life by these new structures. Their creative output represented the continuation of the modernist tendencies in the culture of the second half of the twentieth century, and was totally eclipsed by works of art that directly imported the ideas and the means of expression born and elaborated in western Europe and the US to Lithuania. Until the 1980s, Lithuanian artists were content to use customary, traditional artistic materials and techniques. They used to make use of canvas, oils, wood, stone, and bronze. Sculptors' endeavours to employ iron and concrete were thought to be highly innovative, and the pictures painted with acrylics excited universal interest. Not even installations were practised, let alone video and electronic media. Therefore, when the ideological controls broke down and the hatches were thrown open, the public and the majority of art professionals (curators and critics) were hardly, if at all, surprised by the boom of the new technologies. This process drew them in and perforce achieved their identification with the changes that were taking place. There was an attempt to integrate into the context of western culture as quickly as possible, and this is why the critical discourse *de facto* limited itself to rhetoric which merely asserted the "western quality" of the new works of art. The vocabulary used by the critics was rapidly and artificially adjusted to reflect a whole complex of relevant cultural themes of the contemporary world: from the domestication of the "other" to the phobias of the post-industrial society — even though an ordinary Lithuanian was threatened by those phobias if and only if he or she were to leave his or her country. One could go on forever quoting the thoughts of world-renowned authoritative art critics, which have been hastily paraphrased, adapted to local context, and given Lithuanian verbal expression by their local epigons. It will suffice to say that that which was happening in the sphere of visual arts and art criticism reflected wider cultural and social processes — we also lived through the stage when Lithuanians *en masse* abandoned all local produce in order to throw themselves at bananas which they had not had the opportunity to taste during the years of Soviet deprivation, or when the whole country sported T-shirts with enormous Gucci or Chanel logos embroidered on the front — all made in Turkey and as fake as three-dollar bills. No one thought that to be silly, ugly, or impractical. Thus, one should not be surprised about similar goings-on in the area of artistic creativity, where the goal to absorb foreign experience overshadowed local traditions, themes, and problems. It is true that some of the curators and art critics coming from abroad sought to discover the distinctive character of Lithuanian visual arts, but for the Lithuanians themselves, it did not seem a matter of great concern.

It was the youngest generation of Lithuanians who grew up and matured after 1990, in the atmosphere of independent Lithuania, that emerged as the principal consumers of the new art which complied with western standards. Middle-aged people and older generations were too busy adjusting to the changed economic and social conditions, as well as with creating more satisfactory living conditions for themselves. This left neither time nor energy to follow the permutations of the art field — so much so, that there was hardly any sympathy left for those artists who started complaining once they suddenly found themselves at the periphery of cultural life, having lost not only the public attention to which they had previously been accustomed, but also the exhibition space subsidized by taxpayers.

A few years ago, the economic and social conditions in Lithuania changed once again, this time for the better. Lithuania became more prosperous, people started having more money and more free time. Cultural needs became felt once again — not only by the young, but also by the older generation, who already had a certain pre-formed notion of the kind of art they liked. On the other hand, the state started assigning more funds to the artists' organizations, as well as supporting artistic exhibitions and publications. Diffusion of cultural values is increasingly more widely perceived as an important means for transmitting general education. It is also recognized as enabling people to choose between cheap, mass-produced goods and unique artistic creations that demand adequate preparation both on the part of their creators, and on the part of the viewers. In this context, variety is making a slow comeback among artistic styles. An increasingly greater portion of the public domain is occupied with so-called traditional art, which is linked not only to classical modernism, but also to Soviet neo-traditionalism.

This accordingly raises new requirements for art criticism. The proponents of the new media are gradually losing the cushy conditions they once had. They are openly confronted with the statements that the kind of art they defend is boring, tiresome, and secondary. Even among the younger-generation representatives of the humanities, one can hear debates about whether such art has a right to exist — the art that gives no aesthetic satisfaction and, through aesthetically worthless forms, merely conveys political, philosophical, sociological *vel sim.* ideas, banalizing them in the process. In the current discussion, the arguments formulated by art critics sound weakest of all. Art critics are supplanted by philosophers and sociologists, whose conceptual vocabulary provides a better insight into the processes that are taking place, as well as into the works of art which reflect those processes.

The new media are not popular among bureaucrats, either. As a result, their practitioners encounter considerable obstacles when it comes to implementation of some projects, and when they need to attract funding. The creators of contemporary art also met with sizeable hurdles when they wanted to secure an official status for their organizations and to insert themselves into the already-established structure of the artists' organizations. The latter is very important in Lithuania, since only participation in the activities of such organizations confers certain social guarantees, and permits one to apply for state subsidies. It must be admitted, however, that the official view of contemporary artists has been somewhat mitigated by the international recognition that some of them have gained through their successful participation in artistic events as renowned as the Biennales of Venice or Documenta.

Hostility towards the new media is also prominent in the sphere of public art. Or rather, it is as though, in Lithuania, works of public art exist on two different cultural planes. On the one hand, there are various international projects that acquaint Lithuanian society with the public works of artists who actively reflect upon the public space. And yet, on the other hand, whenever the need arises for some monument or other major public work of art, and a public competition is announced to create it, what wins out in the end is the aesthetic norm whose roots reach all the way down to Soviet times: the commission goes to stylized, figurative statues and to figurative frescoes with a clear, developed representational plot. The activities of self-taught folk artists, who were consistently supported during the years of Soviet domination, have also successfully been revitalized, and their output is on the rise: public spaces are "adorned" with wooden statues that represent various characters from folklore and fairy tales. These are often only slightly better than their closest equivalent, the German garden gnomes. Art criticism *de facto* ignores such phenomena, leaving them to mass-media journalists. The phenomenon of Lithuanian monuments is, once again, analyzed by philosophers and sociologists, and recently also by historians and art historians. Specialized art publications touch upon this question only very cautiously and in a fragmentary manner. One should once again mention the very limited conceptual "toolbox" of art criticism, which does not permit its practitioners to provide a clear and well-argued assessment of the situation. There is a real problem in the fact that the terminology which came to prevail among Lithuanian art critics is practically incomprehensible not only to the commissioners of Soviet-style monuments and to the bureaucrats who lavishly waste public money on the wooden bogeymen. The scholars of the humanities, who were not specifically initiated into the mysteries of the art critics' argot, likewise fail to comprehend it. Thus, it becomes impossible to join forces in order to influence public opinion — and at the present, that would be highly desirable. As a result, art criticism loses a part of its traditional functions since the art critic fails as a mediator between the artist and the viewer. He ceases to guide the public and to dictate his tastes and opinions through comprehensible and persuasive arguments.

It may sound somewhat paradoxical, but at precisely this moment, the extent of harm wrought upon the consciousness of Lithuanian citizens' historical consciousness by the years of Soviet oppression finally becomes apparent. One of its symptoms is the current situation of art consumption and the state of art criticism, which fails to reflect upon it. An ordinary viewer is unable to form an autonomous judgement of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century art, and art critics do not aid in this. As a result, such a viewer misses out on the all-important "pre-history" of the modernist movement, and is likewise left without a clue on how to orientate himself among, and make an informed judgement upon, the artistic phenomena and the works of art from the second half of the twentieth century. Exhibitions of artistic heritage are attended for strictly non-artistic reasons. Even the artistic events and incidents that would immediately guarantee huge public interest in other countries pass largely unnoticed by the wider public. Thus, for example, last year one of the major private galleries in Vilnius presented a retrospective exhibition of Antanas Samuolis, one of the classics of Lithuanian modernism, sometimes styled as "the Lithuanian Van Gogh". The exhibition offered nine new, previously unknown works by the artist for viewing. The discussion that took place among the museum curators, restorers, and art experts remained a specialized debate and failed to achieve any public resonance. One of the reasons art critics and journalists felt themselves powerless in drawing public attention to that thrilling artistic fact was that they knew neither to what category this

incident belonged, nor how it ought to be presented to the public, nor how to turn it into a public sensation. Such a sensation could have encouraged wider interest in the heritage of Lithuanian modernism and provoked public discussions of the importance and value of modernism in the cultural history of Lithuania.

It is precisely this one-sidedness of art criticism that is largely responsible for the fact that, in Lithuania, the problematic phenomenon known as "crossing the museum threshold" has to be approached from the opposite direction than in, let's say, Germany. If in Hannover, educational programmes are devised to help the inhabitants of the working districts overcome their fear of entering sterile and luxurious museum spaces, in Lithuania, on the other hand, one desperately seeks for ploys to maintain huge museum buildings with a tiny budget, and to provide exhibitions with at least a modicum of aesthetic purpose and intelligent conception. Despite these attempts, most exhibitions nevertheless remain unattractive, outmoded, and emit more than a whiff of stolid positivism. People rarely go to a museum for an artistic exhibition. One could lure them more often if at least some exhibitions, mounted truly expertly and with inspiration, were adequately presented in the media. However, the absolute majority of those art critics who write in the papers and appear on television are uninformed to such an extent that they are totally incapable of even judging the merits of the exhibitions of early-twentieth-century art — let alone the works of more distant ages. Nor is the information about exhibitions, formulated in a requisite manner, released to the journalists — while on their own they are not qualified enough to be trusted with the presentation of notable artistic or art historical events to a wider audience.

We live in a situation which some observers have already begun to identify as "the crisis of criticism". The kind of criticism which we now have is only useful, and indispensable, to itself. It does not interest those artists who have mastered the most novel means of expression and who themselves offer interpretations of their works. It is not needed by the lovers of art, since it is uninformative and despotic, requiring from its reader total and unconditional obedience, while at the same time limiting the reader's horizon to one narrow group of artistic phenomena. It does not provide one with the criteria that would enable one to form an autonomous judgement concerning the value, context, and so on, of the art that it presents.

In the popular press, one occasionally meets fairly attractive artistic information of the drawing-room gossip variety. Once again, it satisfies only the passive readers who do not aspire to become art consumers. The artists that are presented in such a manner invariably are not the most interesting ones, and the reader who has a stake in the art scene feels cheated.

Contemporary art criticism in Lithuania, such as it is now, is hardly needed at all, since it is almost unnoticeable. It can be entirely replaced by sociology, gossip journalism, and art history. The latter, perhaps under the impact of the warnings of the imminent death of art history as a discipline, acquired and mastered new analytical instruments, and began to speak in an attractive and interesting manner. From all this, one can draw the following conclusion: the problems that are now arising are positive in principle, since they reflect the new needs of Lithuanian society, the needs that are more diverse from the point of view of cultural consumption — but that is already a subject for another paper.

Published 2005-09-26
Original in Lithuanian
Translation by Mantas Adomenas
Contribution by Kulturos barai
© Giedre Jankeviciute/Kulturos barai
© Eurozine