

Lithuania

IV. Contemporary collectors and contemporary art: institutions as active guides to the contemporary art world

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Art Collecting in Lithuania: Every End is a new Beginning

During the last decade the situation of art collecting is rather ambiguous – on the one hand, we could even count on our fingers the art admirers calling themselves collectors, on the other – it is evident that in Lithuania there is a lot of intellectuals from the soviet times or from crumbling times and also rich people who have accumulated private art collections and the owners present their collections only to a rather closed circle of people. Other agents of art were not so active in this field too – art critics, or art historians, therefore, there are practically no wider investigations about the treasures of private collections. But contemporary art galleries – Vartai, Tulips & Roses, and Stasys Juškus modern art gallery as well as the first art managers` generation are more actively looking for a dialogue between the collectors and the potential buyers of art (this winter there was organized the first seminar on collecting of contemporary art in the National Art Gallery with participation of Iain Robertson ('Sotheby's London) and Alistair Hicks (art adviser of the 'Deutsche Bank'). In 2007 there was organized the first official art auction which received the attention from a lot of curious persons (less from the buyers).

The aforementioned contemporary galleries were the first ones to introduce Lithuanian artists to international audience in contemporary art fairs. Vartai was the first gallery participating in such prestigious art forums as Art Cologne, ARCO Madrid, Vienna Fair as well as Cornice fair during the 52nd Venice Biennial. The gallery was very successful by introducing (and selling) young Lithuanian artists – Andrius Zakarauskas, Ugnius Gelguda – as well as older ones – Jonas Gasi nas (the winner of SwedBank Art Award 2009), Vidmantas Il iukas – to international art collectors from across Europe (and even Singapore). Danut and Allain Mallart, living in Brussels and Paris, are among the most Lithuania and Baltic States oriented collectors. In their rich collection containing works of the iconic international artists – Tony Cragg, Georg Baselitz, John Baldessari among them – was recently complemented with works of promising contemporary Lithuanian artists – Andrius Zakarauskas, Jurga Barilait , Jonas Gasi nas. Their interest to Lithuanian contemporary art scene could be called 'programme' concernment as they not simply purchase the works occasionally, but follow the actions in the scene carefully, and try to treat the local artists equally to the international ones. It is important not to forget that the first impulse, which attracted them to Lithuania, was the Lithuanian origin of Mrs. Danut Mallart herself, who has never abandoned this interest toward native country's art life.

In 2009 – the year of Vilnius – European capital of culture Vartai launched an exciting project ARTscape aimed to introduce art of 12 former, current and future European cultural capitals. Part of the Vilnius – European capital of culture 2009 program ARTscape is a large-scale project that involves contemporary art, cinema and jazz, co-organized by some of the most qualified cultural institutions: Kino pavasaris, Vilnius jazz and Gallery Vartai. The three different media – art, cinema and music – has outlined the diagrams of dynamic cultural processes. The gallery decided not simply to 'import' foreign culture to Vilnius, but to equally represent contemporary Lithuanian art scene and thus to attract attention of international audience and collectors. It wasn't such a difficult task as the project involved such number of 'brand' names, Erwin Wurm, Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL), João Paulo Feliciano, Ignasi Aballí, Hans Op de Beeck among them. Lithuanian part was represented by (locally) established artists – Evaldas Jansas, Gintaras Makarevi ius, Dainius Liškevi ius – as well as Žilvinas Landzbergas, Andrius Zakarauskas, Monika Bielskyt , Ugnius Gelguda of the younger generation.

The international-Lithuanian artists' combination created unexpected contexts and relations, as well as raised questions about country's contemporary art quality and position in the international context.

Beside participating in the contemporary art fairs, Tulips & Roses gallery quite a new and interesting strategy of 'exporting' Lithuanian art to Europe and USA: they make exchanges with diverse galleries in Paris, Berlin and New York by bringing already prepared (and shown in Lithuania) exhibitions including Lithuanian artists. Thus young artists – Gintaras Didžiapetris and Liudvikas Buklys – were represented in *D1Studio* in Paris, *Croy Nielsen Space in Berlin*, and *Front Desk Apparatus* gallery in New York.

The first serious attempt to attract attention of international collectors was an implementation of the long-delayed idea of establishing an art fair in Vilnius. With a generous support of Vilnius – European capital of culture 2009 program it was organized by Lithuanian Art Gallerists' Association (LMGA) and curated by well-know curator Raminta Jur nait in July, 2009 under the name of ARTVILNIUS'09. More than 100 galleries from **31 country (including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Argentina, India)** occupied LITEXPO Exhibition and Conference centre in Vilnius. The key success of the fair was a free-of-charge stands offered to the galleries, which accepted the invitation for various reasons – curiosity, possibility to be noticed or to exchange contacts. Although not so commercially successful, the fair was one of the first steps to enliven and gather local galleries. However, the two mentioned and internationally active contemporary art galleries did not participate in this event.

The fair also offered exhibitions of sculptures, objects and installations, expositions of art publications, cultural institutions etc. Podium discussions, educational events and plenty of other different events were also in the program of ARTVILNIUS'09.

There are not so many contemporary art collectors in Lithuania or they do not wish publicity yet. Up till now, unlike in a lot of European countries, there is no public contemporary art collection, shown in the space suitable for it.

Therefore, the examples of modern and contemporary Lithuanian art are still to be seen in the collections of the major institutions – The National Museum of M.K. Ciurlionis in Kaunas and National Gallery of Art in Vilnius – as well as in temporary exhibitions in the Contemporary Art Centre (Vilnius) or private galleries. The first two possess most valuable collections of the 20th century Lithuanian art, and sometimes one can feel a slight competition between the two. However, officially they share and lend the works for special exhibitions or surveys of a particular artist. The institutions closely collaborate with private art collectors – the large-scale exhibition ‘Gardens of Paradise’ of an emigrant but internationally established Lithuanian artist – Vytautas Kasiulis at the Lithuanian Museum of Art in Vilnius is one of such. The works were borrowed from a number of Lithuanian collectors – Edmundas Armoška, Rolandas Vali nas, Eugenijus Tinfavi ius, Edita Mildažyt ir Gintautas Vyšniauskas, Gediminas Petraitis. The majority of the works were lent by the artist’s long-time patron dr. Juozas Kazickas (USA). It is only one of the many examples of such collaboration, which, naturally, expands to more private cooperation between curators and collectors. For example, in the fall of 2009 art critic and curator Laima Kreivyt compiled an exposition of Lithuanian art for the ‘block-buster’ exhibition Gender Check in MUMOK, Vienna by choosing particular works from various private collections.

Today most often Lithuanian collectors choose the artists represented by contemporary Lithuanian art galleries and the names of them permanently can be found in the works of art critics, or the texts of journalists, in TV and they naturally appear in international context too. Among them we could name the younger generation artists represented by the Vartai gallery – Andrius Zakarauskas, Ugnius Gelguda, undoubtedly, Žilvinas Kempinas, and also – Gintaras Didžiapetris, Liudvikas Buklis, who are represented by a young Tulips & Roses gallery. Having consolidated internationally, but do not cooperating with Lithuanian galleries there are such artists as Deimantas Narkevi ius, but quite often instead of finding a buyer in Lithuania, they find such in Paris, London or Berlin.

The most important feature of new and serious collectors – is their consistency and attraction of professional art experts in forming their art collection. One of such collectors, still avoiding publicity, has the aim to gather historically consistent modern art collection of the middle of 20th century up till present, and he will be the first to present it to the public in his personal museum. It would be the first serious counterweight for the state museums of the country which, having rich collections, have no possibilities to decently display them to the public.

Presently, the youngest collector in Lithuania, Boris Symulevi , is forming his collection from the works of Lithuanian and foreign artists of the young generation, including the paintings of already mentioned A. Zakarauskas as well as the conceptual creation of G. Didžiapetris – ‘-1’, to be precise, this is the piece of art which is not yet created and will not be created, because the right to its (non)creation has already bought the young collector.

Next to the complicated and rather slow contemporary art collecting situation there adds the above-mentioned uncertainty of relationships between the galleries and the artists, complicated consolidation of artists in international context, insufficient attention of popular media for contemporary art processes that are partially predetermined by the elite-ness and incapability (or unwillingness) of other players of art – curators, critics and theoreticians to raise interest among the wider public in this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, recession in this case has served for the benefit of art market and the articles on art as the reliability of investment are appearing more often and attract the glances of potential buyers. The question now is – who is going to catch those glances quicker, most substantially or urgently and attract them to their side. And this is the work of all interested players of art.

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Andrius Zakarauskas, Lern Malen (learn painting), 2008, oil on canvas, 180x200 cm, courtesy: collection Danut and Alain Mallart



Ugnius Gelguda Žalgiris,
audio-visual installation,
2006, 3 slide-projectors,
sound, original size 3 x 14 m,
courtesy: artist and António
Gomes de Pinho

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