

# From Central Europe to the Baltics Before and After 1989: The State of Contemporary Art Canons

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———— Three concrete instances of modern and contemporary art development in the former Soviet bloc are addressed in the study. Comparing three particular cases of post-socialist countries (Czechoslovakia, Poland and Lithuania), three distinctive situations are identified in order to establish a link between modern and contemporary art and the emergence of canonized stories of their development. Although these concrete cases turned out to represent a certain range of situations-models that have taken place, the study indicates a variety of omissions and unrecognized vital moments in the currently prevailing canons, which puts the connection of the shifting point of 1989 and the transition from modern to contemporary art into a new light.

*Keywords:* 1989, Central and Eastern Europe, modern art, contemporary art, official art, unofficial art, underground, canons.

The aim of this paper is to re-think how the crucial changes of political regimes influenced the ways of presenting and canonizing modern and contemporary art. The unique historical point for us is the shift of 1989 which marks not only the state of regaining independence and getting rid of real-socialist system but, at the same time, in the sphere of art, the transition and drifting of art towards global and contemporary<sup>1</sup>. We have looked at three particular cases that, as belonging to the region routinely described as post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), often appear quite similar in the nature of their modern and contemporary art development trajectories<sup>2</sup>. But is this perception of continuity and homogeneity regarding contemporary art in CEE before 1989 correct?

Starting with our principal term of canon and the core issue of establishing the canons of modern and contemporary art in our region, we would like to clarify the notion of canon in this study. The different uses of the word “canon” may involve, on the one hand, the issue of establishing the principles according to which the histories and accounts of the past developments are told as the main story, indicating the major and prevalent line of art and in this way ex post constituting and frequently reinstituting the definition of modern or contemporary art at the given time. On the other hand, while talking about contemporary art (in fact, the history of contemporary art), another understanding of the canon may be at play here – as the prevalent trend or fashion of art at the moment, i.e. certain tendencies on the current scene of contemporary art.

1 For a full-scale analysis of the process of shifting of the category of “contemporary” in museums of modern and contemporary art from the 1940s to the 1990s in the region of Western Europe and elsewhere, see Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or: What’s ‘Contemporary’ in Museums of Contemporary Art?* London: Koenig Books, 2013, pp. 12–18. For more on the notion of global as narrating the history of contemporary art after 1989, see Hans Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate”, in: *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009, pp. 38–74, and Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization”, in: *The Global Contemporary and The Rise of New Art Worlds after 1989*, Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, Peter Weibel (eds.), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press for ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2013, pp. 186–192.

2 It could be mentioned that the initial stimulus for this study emerged after visiting three museums presenting modern and contemporary art in the region: the National Gallery in Prague (*Veletržní palác*), the Museum of Art in Łódź (*Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi*) and the National Gallery in Vilnius (*Nacionalinė dailės galerija*). While comparing the presentations of modern and contemporary art in those museums, we noticed that the different developments of political regimes in each country and their effects on creating art were curiously missing. This observation was one of the motivations for choosing the particular cases for further consideration.

In this text we are dealing with canons in the first sense of the term. In order to indicate and formulate the three regional models of canonizing the history of modern and contemporary art in CEE, we are analyzing the ways in which history – telling the story, so to speak – is established in the contexts of separate countries: Czechoslovakia, Poland and Lithuania. This can be essentially viewed at two levels. We may look at permanent exhibitions or sections of permanent exhibitions of modern and contemporary art in various institutions functioning in the capacity of presenting modern and contemporary art in the context of a given country<sup>3</sup>. At the other level, we can identify how the story is told literally in the publications surveying modern and contemporary art and its development or various contributing partial texts.

We are about to proceed this way and to combine to some degree both levels in order to identify the current prevailing canons of telling the history of modern and contemporary art in the context of each given country. However, at the same time, being aware of the meta-level of the canon creating processes, critically reflecting on these canons and identifying mishaps and unrecognized distortions and omissions, we are going to expose the crucial distinctions of modern and contemporary art developments in the given countries. Although it may appear that we are taking these three cases *ad hoc* (as studies focused on a particular country), as it tends to be done in the historical and art-historical style of research (for the purpose of description of one particular case or comparison of two concrete cases), we are about to work with the research case study design in a deeper qualitative methodological sense. Not as individual cases of particular countries, but as a range of cases in order to identify and cover the essential situations-models that existed and may need to be differentiated for the purpose of clarifying the basic distinguishable scenarios taking place throughout Central and Eastern Europe more generally.

<sup>3</sup> To some degree including the implications of the establishment of new modern and contemporary art museums in the post-socialist region.



1.  
Vladimír Ambroz, *Auto / Car*, 1977.  
Photo by Miroslav Ambroz

Vladimír Ambroz, *Automobilis*, 1977



2.  
Vladimír Ambroz, project sketch: *Project Car*  
(parking lot Provažnikova), February 1977,  
duration 5 min. Courtesy of the author

Vladimír Ambroz, projekto eskizas: „Projektas  
„Automobilis“ (automobilių stovėjimo aikštelė  
Provažnikova), 1977 m. vasaris, trukmė 5 min.“

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In view of the sudden situational breaking points and how they may relate to the late 1980s outburst of contemporary art following the developments of the 1970s and 1980s, it may be a good idea to start with the Czechoslovak situation. Similarly, as in the case of other CEE countries, Czech and Slovak art was exposed to the wave of deliberate “implementation” of Socialist Realism at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. However, following 1956 and later, until the turn of the 1960s, the liberation tendency advanced to a state where, besides the silent infiltration of certain modernist trends into the milieu of officially promoted Socialist Realism, modern art explicitly and declaratively could be exhibited and was even included in the international presentations of Czechoslovak art (e.g. Vladimír Boudník, Jan Kotík at the Brussels EXPO in 1958, a joint exhibition of Czech and Polish abstractionists in 1962, or Jiří Kolář at 9 Europäischen Künstler in Western Berlin in 1963)<sup>4</sup>. In the 1960s, the years that lead to the famous Prague Spring, the entire scene of initially and to various degrees semi-official artists working in line with the trends in Western art established themselves before the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies and subsequent collaborationist “normalization”. Contributing to the main line of Czechoslovak fine arts in the second half of 1960s, these artists, practically functioning within the framework that overlapped with the milieu of the official Union of Czechoslovak Fine Artists<sup>5</sup>, shaped the mainstream of fine arts at the time.

The fundamental organizational and institutional backlash came at the beginning of the 1970s, when in the framework of so-called “normalization” this official union of fine artists (*Svaz československých výtvarných umělců*) was dissolved and founded again from scratch – with “readmitted” members carefully screened. Thus, instead of the previous union of several thousand artists that included the ones representing up-to-date trends,

4 For more on the particular exhibitions and developments representing this trend, see *Ohniska znovuzrození: České umění 1956–1963*, Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy/Ústav dějin umění AV ČR, 1994, pp. 9–13, 297–308.

5 The official Union of Fine Artists came into existence through the Communist Party’s pressure for a merger of various pre-war independent fine art associations, following the 1948 Communist Party takeover. Initially as *Ústřední svaz československých výtvarných umělců* (1948–1956) and later as *Svaz československých výtvarných umělců* (1956–1970), the union was a common organization for Czechoslovak (i.e. both Czech and Slovak) fine artists.

the new union was established with about 300 carefully verified people<sup>6</sup> not having much in common with current art booming in the liberal 1960s<sup>7</sup>. This expulsion of artists who were representing the most relevant and current trends of art from the official art scene was the crucial circumstance of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>8</sup>. It was not until the late 1980s and the advent of perestroika liberalization that *Svaz českých výtvarných umělců* began to change and to include artists of the younger generation.

As far as the practical functioning of the art world is concerned, in fact, this displacement of the 1960s art scene<sup>9</sup> outside the legal bounds decisively shaped the 1970s. Many of the artists who did not become part of the new union lived professionally on the fringes of the art world (restoration, book illustrations, or other kind of applied arts). It was similar to artists who newly graduated from the two existing art schools. If they did not become the members of the union (on the condition of their Communist Party membership or as candidates for party membership in most instances), then, as graduates of university-level art schools, they were entitled to some privileges – most importantly, a stamp in the ID enabling them to

6 This “reorganization” coincided with relaunching Czechoslovak institutions and associations as officially separate Czech and Slovak entities, though they were even more controlled by the Communist Party (federalization of Czechoslovakia, the only reform achievement of 1968). Particularly in the Czech context federalization and creating of the Czech Union of Fine Artists – *Svaz českých výtvarných umělců* (1972–1990) served purely as a pretext to politically motivate the cleansing of the membership of the existing union. *Svaz českých výtvarných umělců* and *Zvůz slovenských výtvarných umělcov* were under the umbrella of *Svaz československých výtvarných umělců* (1972–1990) – an organization without individual memberships. At the end of 1972, the official new Czech Union of Fine Artists *Svaz českých výtvarných umělců* had 293 members (compared to 3,687 members in the previous union). Four years later, the membership was reduced to 756 (See Jan Mervart, *Kultura v karanténě: umělecké svazy a jejich konsolidace za rané normalizace*, Praha: NLN, 2015, p. 73). As federalization and emergence of one’s “own” union was perceived as a more authentic agenda in Slovakia, the Slovakian art scene in the 1970s and 1980s was less polarized in the sense of distinguishing between the official and unofficial art. Still, in terms of artistic tendencies heading towards contemporary art, the developments may be perceived as parallel in the federalized Czech and Slovak Republics. In smaller Slovakia with a smaller art scene, this had been assisted by the less immediate repression and more liberal atmosphere in the intellectual and art realms.

7 At the very best involving some figures who became visible in the 1940s and by the 1960s were representing the official Communist Party regime establishment in the first place.

8 Artists who were not the members of this union could not exhibit their works or could do that with substantial difficulties.

9 The art scene of the liberal era which culminated in the second half of the 1960s, preceding the 1968 Prague Spring and immediately following it.

avoid the requirement of full-time official employment<sup>10</sup>, but this did not mean the right to be exhibited<sup>11</sup>.

How could this story be narrated from the viewpoint of artistic trends and tendencies precursory to contemporary art? Which artists and characteristic groups represented the canon of this direction? How was the development from pre-war modernism and avant-garde to contemporary art presented? Petr Nedoma, a long-standing curator of Rudolfinum<sup>12</sup>, who curated one of the first survey exhibitions in the National Gallery in Brno at the start of the 1990s<sup>13</sup>, used the distinction of “unofficial” and “official” scene as a primary designation while identifying the omitted and not exhibited art. Since then this perspective has developed even further as the common understanding and narrative of the 1970s and 1980s art. It has proceeded even so far as to leave the “official scene” out from the narrative, and the story of the art of the 1970s and 1980s has become a story of art, originally labelled as unofficial, with disappearing awareness of official art and the actual distinction of unofficial and official. This narrative, at the end paradoxically neglecting the split and diversified nature of the art of the 1970s and 1980s, may be questioned from various viewpoints.

At a closer look, this narrative as the main line of explaining what art was back then, in the 1970s and 1980s, has substantial problems – at least in the way it is told (in view of particular names that are pinpointed). The majority of the artists from the “unofficial” camp who succeeded in becoming part of the canon, as it is currently told, belong to the generation of artists who established themselves as quite influential artists already in the 1960s, and following the political developments of the end of the 1960s were *en bloc* pushed into the unofficial sphere<sup>14</sup>. At the time of paying off “exhibi-

<sup>10</sup> They could also purchase artistic materials and ask for a studio space.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Viktor Karlík’s detailed account of the practice of a young artist without the art school graduate status – Viktor Karlík, *Podzemní práce (Zpětný deník)/Underground work (Retroactive diary)*, Praha: Revolver Revue, 2012 (published on the occasion of Karlík’s retrospective exhibition in the Gallery of West Bohemia, Plzeň 16 May –19 August 2012), and compare it with the situation of the late 1970s art academy graduate Jiří Sozanský (Jiří Sozanský, *1969 – rok zlomu*, Praha: Symposion, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> The main *kunsthalle* presenting contemporary international as well as local art in Prague.

<sup>13</sup> *Neoficiální (České umění 1968–1989)* (Non-Official; Czech Fine Art 1968–1989), Governor’s Palace, Moravian Gallery (Místodržitelský palác, Moravská galerie) in Brno, 4–28 October 1990, curated by Petr Nedoma.

<sup>14</sup> As not becoming the members of the new official Union of Fine Artists at the beginning of the 1970s.

tions' debt" right after 1989 (an exhibition boom in the early 1990s covering for the impossibility of exhibiting in the 1970s and 1980s), these artists were easily hailed as unofficial due to their easy identifiability – with a classically understood official educational and earlier professional status – and importantly established as significant figures of the art scene already in the 1960s.

However, the generation of artists who entered the art scene in the 1970s and 1980s, with the exception of some particular artistic groups<sup>15</sup> and figures<sup>16</sup>, happens to be omitted, even though these omitted layers extensively represented the “unofficial” characteristic of art in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>17</sup>. This way the artists who had become part of the authentic art establishment in the liberalized 1960s<sup>18</sup>, after 1989 took the spotlight from unofficial artists who newly emerged in the 1970s and particularly 1980s. The art of the late 1970s and 1980s tends not to be shown as much as the 1960s established art, which was still active in its “zone of displacement”<sup>19</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s and is being presented as the primary representation of the 1970s and 1980s art. As these artists were established and exhibited their works already in the 1960s, after 1989 it was easy to take notice of them as artists worth of exhibiting. It was done so in an explicit contrast with less known unofficial artists who emerged in the late 1970s and recent 1980s and who may have achieved a distinguished position among artists on the unofficial scene, but who frequently did not have formal fine arts academy education<sup>20</sup> and an earlier publicly noticed art record.

<sup>15</sup> Artistic groups of the 1980s, such as “Tvrdohlaví” and “12/15”.

<sup>16</sup> Particularly those who became part of the new teaching staff at the fine arts academies immediately after 1989.

<sup>17</sup> This unofficial 1980s art omitted after 1989 (created by artists born in the 1950s and 1960s) is, through the profiles of 98 artists, extensively recorded in Jiří Luhan and Petr Poucha's book *Splátka na dluh*, Praha: Torst, 2000 (originally a *samizdat* catalogue of the unofficial scene from the late 1980s).

<sup>18</sup> Truly recognized artists of the 1960s who emerged since the 1950s and the turn of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g. Olbram Zoubek, among the most iconic ones).

<sup>19</sup> Still, in many instances, only continuing their 1960s or even earlier artistic agendas.

<sup>20</sup> Very strictly controlled access to the university level fine arts education at the times of “normalization”.



Along with and partially overlapping with that<sup>21</sup>, what is in the Czechoslovak context described specifically as “underground”<sup>22</sup> slips away almost entirely<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, paradoxically, a number of artists who were presented as unofficial were functioning at more levels and, in a certain sense, they were coined by their encounters with the official sphere – for instance, when they were regular students of art schools or were trying to reform the existing Artists’ Union after their graduation to allow the younger generation to enter the official Union of Fine Artists and to start exhibiting in official galleries (it started to happen since 1987<sup>24</sup>).

But why are we trying to describe the nature of the art scene at the end of real socialism? This long-term displacement of the art world beyond the official scene may have influenced the nature of art with implications of the upcoming transition from modern to contemporary art. In the general conditions of “normalized” society, artists were frequently derailed from their genre practices and circumstances. While not being able to exhibit extensively in the galleries, they created artworks not for the public at large and spent more time in their studios or went beyond regular gallery spaces – in the sense of temporary shows at unusual venues. Along with longer-standing, but still improvised little galleries (in scientific institutions or theatre studios) and various temporary festivals and “confrontations” in site-specific improvised settings (*Vinohradská* or *Holešovická tržnice*)

21 As the previously described layer of the late 1970s and 1980s unofficial art (I would correct it like this: “As the previously described layer of the late 1970s and 1980s unofficial art (see the central and initiating segment of artists in the “underground” milieu who attended art schools, e.g. Zorka Ságlová, and had a substantial academic background in fine arts, e.g. Ivan Martin Jirous”), initially exhibiting even in prominent galleries at the close-down of the liberal era at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s (for example, Zorka Ságlová’s *Hay-Straw* exhibition in Václav Špála Gallery in August 1969, see Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Praha: Karolinum Press, 2014, pp. 91–92).

22 Groups of people, perhaps better described as communities or communes, identifiable by their fancy for the band Plastic People of the Universe and its associated milieu or the *samizdat* reviews, e.g. Vokno or Revolver Revue.

23 Perhaps with the exception of Viktor Karlík and very few others. See, for example, Viktor Karlík, *Podzemní práce (Zpětný deník)/Underground Work (Retroactive Diary)*, Praha: Revolver Revue, 2012.

24 See the extensive description of the position of unofficial artists who at a certain moment were cooperating with official structures by one of the late 1970s art academy graduates Jiří Sozanský in his *1969 – rok zlomu*, Praha: Symposion, 2015.

or exterior sites of particular neighbourhoods (*Malostranské dvorky*)<sup>25</sup>, a perceivable shift to the conceptual character of performance, land and environmental art and other alterations of the traditional art media could be noticed. With the advancement of the 1980s, it was further influenced by the emergence of the postmodern tendency (i.e. neo-expressionism, new expression and grotesque). At the moment of the “wall” breaking down, these 1980s trends<sup>26</sup> represented what started to be shown in the “West” from Czechoslovakia as the new era of global art erupted (which was, last but not least, accelerated by the 1989 collapse of the Iron Curtain).

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Switching from the Czechoslovak case to the Polish situation, in the perspective of the shifting point of 1989, we could perceive the state of contemporary art in these two countries as being not far apart from each other. However, we should take notice of certain differences in the dynamics of the 1970s and 1980s and in the actual circumstances making for quite distinctive developments, although a parallel of the very similar dynamics of the 1950s and 1960s could still be made.

The Thaw (“*Odwilz*”) associated with the new first party secretary Władysław Gomułka coming to power in 1956 may be considered in view of the comparison with Czechoslovakia as having quite liberalizing consequen-

<sup>25</sup> The appearance of improvised little galleries, festivals and “confrontations” was not limited to Prague. In a certain way, it was easier for them to flourish outside the capital, beyond Prague’s focused spotlight. In this sense, a crucial and autonomously developing scene emerged in Brno, which even started to institutionalize itself. See 80: *brněnská osmdesátá*, Marcela Macharáčková (ed.), Brno: Muzeum města Brna ve spolupráci s TT klubem, 2010 (published on the occasion of the 80: *brněnská osmdesátá* (80: The Brno Eighties) exhibition in *Muzeum města Brna Špilberk* (Brno City Museum Špilberk), 13 May –1 August 2010 (one of the very few retrospective exhibitions devoted to the 1980s art, besides the “Eighties” series of 14 exhibitions of single artists curated by Mariana Placáková in Prague Václav Havel Library between 2012 – 2014 and further two follow-up exhibitions in Topič’s salon in 2015 and 2016); for more on other regional art scenes, see *Zakázané umění II*, a monothematic issue of the magazine for contemporary art, No. 1–2, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> See the anthologies of texts and documents related to the 1980s trends of fine arts and their transition into the 1990s and the new millennium: *České umění 1980–2010: Texty a dokumenty*, Jirí Ševčík, Pavlína Moragnaoná, Terzeie Nekvindová, Dagmar Svatošová (eds.), Praha: VVP AVU, 2011; *Mezi první a druhou moderností 1985–2012 [katalog] / Between the First and Second Modernity 1985–2012 [catalogue]*, Jirí Ševčík, Edith Jeřábková (eds.) Praha: VVP AVU, 2011 (an exhibition with the same title in Veletržní palác/Trade Fare Palace, Praha, 9 March –8 July 2012); *Pod jednou střešou: fenomén postmoderny v úvahách o českém výtvarném umění: sborník textů*, Petr Nedoma, Josef Prokeš (eds.), Brno: Masarykova univerzita/Jota, 1994.



3.

Zbigniew Libera, *Jak trenuje się dziewczynki / How to Train Little Girls*, 1987. VHS, 16'46" © Zbigniew Libera. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

Zbigniew Libera, *Kaip treniruoti mergaites*, 1987

es, since in the immediate aftermath of Gomułka's coming to power, abstraction came to be officially tolerated. The paintings that represented Poland at the exhibition of art of the socialist countries in Moscow in 1958 caused an uproar. As compared to the paintings representing other countries, Polish paintings had abstract motives<sup>27</sup>. Although in the early 1960s, the pressure to restrain artistic freedom may have existed, it was quite difficult to bring the artists "back into line". By the end of the 1960s, various kinds of neo-avant-garde, especially abstract and conceptual art, were encouraged and even supported by the state, as long as they did not contain plain political statements. Thus, speaking about the 1960s, we may see the developments in Poland as parallel to the Czechoslovak case. The point of divergence in Polish-Czechoslovak comparisons is certainly the post-1968 "normalization" which resulted in the displacement of the existing Czechoslovak art scene outside the official Union of Fine Artists and essentially outside the legal boundaries.

The real socialist regime in Poland embraced newly emerging neo-avant-garde trends. What we have in mind is various biennales and festivals with a substantial element of land art and happenings that were taking place since the mid-1960s in the urban centres of originally German territories newly populated by Poles (a form of cultural revitalization used for the purposes of humanizing the newly gained territories). For example, precisely on such an occasion – Wrocław Symposium (May 1970) – a conceptual wave in Polish art was showcased, as this government-sponsored festival was used as an occasion to present and extensively discuss conceptual art<sup>28</sup>. Although this may appear coincidental, we may see more generally that even increasingly more conceptual and performative Polish art was not necessarily created outside the regime. Various alternative galleries coexisted in major urban centres where at the time non-orthodox art could be presented. Piotr Piotrowski even claims that Gierek's West-leaning and western investments attracting the regime crucially needed to maintain liberal variety and alternative cultural trends, and compared to the 1970s Czechoslovakia, he sees the conditions for the wide presentation of alternative art in Poland quite as unprecedented<sup>29</sup>.

27 Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945*, Poznań: Rebis, 1999, pp. 41–45.

28 Grzegorz Dziamski, "Konceptualizm", in: *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku: od Awangardy do postmodernizmu*, Grzegorz Dziamski (ed.), Warszawa: Instytut kultury, 1996, p. 377.

29 Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945*, Poznań: Rebis, 1999, pp. 212–213.

In this sense, apparently nothing much changed even after declaring the Martial Law in December 1981. If artists did not engage in politics, irrespective of the provocative potential of art, even Jaruzelski's militarized regime<sup>30</sup> did not pay much attention to them. But to what extent is this clear-cut liberal picture of the Polish situation correct? In the 1970s, the secret police actually undertook a number of operations regarding some of conceptual and action artists in Poland<sup>31</sup>. For instance, Zbigniew Libera was sentenced for a year and a half for the illegal oppositional political *samizdat* print in the first half of the 1980s. In view of the Czechoslovak situation, these instances were more of an exception. In Czechoslovakia, many artists, who were not readmitted to the newly relaunched official union of fine artists, from time to time were monitored by the secret police (*StB*). In the case of various exhibitions, besides the continuous overseeing by various administrative and cultural-administrative bodies in Czechoslovakia, the secret police took active measures: they were limiting exhibition possibilities, dissolving exhibitions and even destroying art pieces<sup>32</sup>. Yet, what has become a challenge in the Polish context was – in view of a deepening political divide – not to fall into the trap of binary conflict. In Piotrowski's understanding, the actual breakthrough of alternative art from its state-nurtured semi-alternative version of the 1970s took the shape of the emergence of “the third position” in the bipolar conflict cutting through Polish society in the 1980s<sup>33</sup> and no fall of alternative art into one rank with the opposition<sup>34</sup> (i.e. the Catholic church supporting it).

30 In December 1981, the Polish minister of defence, General Jaruzelski, declared the Martial Law during his campaign to eliminate the *Solidarność* movement challenging the existing real socialist regime in Poland.

31 Paradoxically, rather leftist artists became the targets of these undertakings – Jarosław Kozłowski, Zofia Kulik, Przemysław Kwiek had got in the spotlight of political secret police regarding their complaints about misappropriations in one of the art union organizations – *Pracownicy sztuk plastycznych*; see Łukasz Ronduda, “Neo-Avant-Garde Movement in the Security Service Files”, in: *Piktogram*, 9/10, 2007–2008, pp. 28–27, through Tomáš Pospiszyl, *Asociativní dějepis umění*, Praha: Tranzit, 2014, pp. 140–142.

32 If we put aside the first layer of managing control represented by the sophisticated system of exhibition and event permission procedures, mapped out to the very last potentially dangerous detail (i.e. the regulation of printing exhibition invitations and announcements).

33 Militarized party state versus the Church and civil society as an institutionalized opposition to this late version of the real-socialist regime in Poland.

34 Explicitly pointing this regarding the Polish context, it should be noted that in the Czechoslovak context unofficial art tended to be implicitly associated with the political opposition to the “normalization” regime irrespective of the intention, background and association of the artists.

Looking for the initial origins of the current era of contemporary art in the Czechoslovak and Polish context, “unofficial art” of the late 1970s and the 1980s in Czechoslovakia and emancipated “alternative art” of the 1980s in Poland were shaped by new expression and grotesque, and through postmodern impulses reached beyond the local modernist avant-garde; at the time when the Iron Curtain collapsed, they represented art that was readable abroad.

4.  
“Amphitheatre” of  
Homestead-Museum of  
Orvidai, 1992. Photo by  
Jolanta Klietkutė

Orvidų sodybos-  
muziejaus komplekso  
„amfiteatras“, 1992



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In the Lithuanian case, the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and the breakthrough year of 1989 seems to be the landmark of the emergence of contemporary art. For instance, both volumes of “(In)dependent Contemporary Art Histories: Artist-Run Initiatives in Lithuania” start their narratives from the year of 1987. A characteristic description of the common understanding of the situation can be found in Vytautas Michelkevičius and Lina Michelkevičė’s article on the unwritten histories of (new) media art in Lithuania. The Soviet period is seen as rather isolated, and the majority of

Besides, the personal connections of the artists with the political opposition, given the fact that the opposition consisted primarily of cultural figures and artists, even the bare fact of doing your own art or any independent activity was understood by the regime as a subversive oppositionist undertaking. The most illustrative example could be the case of the Czechoslovak underground movement which from playing music within a very particular isolated and limited subculture got to the point of becoming one of the crucial constitutive milieus of Charta 77. Thus, any non-regime self-organized festival tended to be attributed to the “underground,” even if it was just a grass-roots initiative of local artists or a group of artists looking for an opportunity to organize and show their artworks.

post-modern developments are perceived to have been happening almost at the same time. In their words, “isolated from international development during the Soviet period (1940–1990), after 1990, Lithuanian artists and art discourse faced both an abundance of artistic freedom and the simultaneous burst of various unfamiliar art movements, which in the Western world had arisen successively throughout the decades”<sup>35</sup>, and as a result, “the condensed historical time, which encapsulated the bigger part of art development after modernism into less than two decades, is among the core post-Soviet conditions”<sup>36</sup>.

Speaking about the thesis of “continual development of modern art” in the period of isolation, it is implied that even so-called unofficial art might be seen as continuous and lacking much of the traces of influence of Western contemporary art between the 1960s and the 1980s<sup>37</sup>. Such a narrative is widely employed in Lithuanian history and theory of art and is particularly apparent in the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, where it is homogenous not only in terms of formal development, but also in the given historical context. As the art historian Linara Dovydaitytė notices, its visual narrative presents the history of Soviet art as a history of artistic invention, which starts with modern realism and ends with abstract art, and does that in juxtaposing officially and unofficially produced and exhibited artworks without explaining their different statuses and meanings<sup>38</sup>.

35 Vytautas Michelkevičius, Lina Michelkevičė, “Unwritten Histories of Extinct Media Art in Lithuania: From the 2000s of Great Promise to the Multidirectional 2010s”, in: *Acoustic. Space (#15) Open Fields. Art and Science Research in the Network Society*, Rasa Smite, Raitis Smits and Armin Medosch (eds.), 2017, p. 70.

36 Vytautas Michelkevičius, Lina Michelkevičė, *ibid.*, p. 70. It should be mentioned that the histories of the last decades are still in the making. However, even in the single publications the year of 1989 becomes a marking point for quite radical changes: a transition from modernist to postmodernist or contemporary expression (see, for instance, the book about the Post Ars artist group, which is known for their land and performance art in the 1990s, and is thus described as late (neo-)avantgarde, *Post Ars. Partitūra*, Agnė Narušytė (ed.), Vilnius: M puslapiai, Šiuolaikinio meno centras, 2017).

37 Accordingly, this thesis implies that postmodern art in Lithuania is missing – there was not enough time for it to appear in the narrative based on the linear timeline. In fact, as the curator Raimundas Malašauskas writes, Lithuanian artists at that time preferred the modernist role of an artist as a victim and postmodernism was used mostly in the negative sense to describe something that was foreign and unknown (Raimundas Malašauskas, “Glosarijus. ABC – avangardas: 1999 / Glossary. ABC – Avant-Garde: 1999”, in: *Lietuvos dailė 1989–1999: dešimt metų [parodos katalogas]*, Vilnius: Šiuolaikinio meno centras, 1999, pp. 59–60).

38 Linara Dovydaitytė, “Post-Soviet Writing of History: The Case of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius”, in: *Kunsteiaduslikke Uurimusi*, Vol. 19, No. 3/4, 2010, p. 118.

However, the notion of official and unofficial art before 1989 in the Lithuanian case is, although binary, still quite different from the Czechoslovak and Polish cases. In Soviet Lithuania the official Artists' Union (*LSSR Dailininkų sąjunga*) apparently had a much more controlling role for a longer period than in the Czechoslovak or Polish contexts and the cultural climate was also more consistent, having not experienced any break-ups as in the Czechoslovak case. For instance, in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, artists, if they were art school graduates but not the members of the official Artists' Union, could not exhibit in official exhibition spaces, but were still able to get a place to work and a stamp in their personal ID legalizing their freelance status. It was not possible in Lithuania, where even artistic materials were sold in special shops that only served the members of the Artists' Union<sup>39</sup>.

The maximum control imposed over various aspects of professional work and daily life of its members, and the gradual character of admittance through regular selections was the basis for a certain consistency inside and beyond the official Artists' Union. This type of long-term consistency was blurring the boundaries between what could be called official and unofficial artistic activity or official and unofficial art. It seems that there was no space to go beyond or "under" the system, so artists had quite a lot of time to figure out the ways to function within it. For instance, they used their "officially" assigned studios for quite "unofficial" purposes such as presenting their "unofficial" artworks. Thus, many so-called unofficial or non-conformist and official/conformist artists were mingling in a similar field and paradigm of art. It would be inaccurate to say that there were examples in their pure form in both groups and that one side did not make any contributions to the developments of modern art (as in the case of painter Vincentas Gečas), or that the other side was not making any compromises, for example, in terms of titles of their works (as painter Vincas Kisarauskas did).

However, bearing in mind the concept of "silent modernism" proposed by Elona Lubytė<sup>40</sup> or Alfonsas Andriuškevičius's idea of "semi-non-

<sup>39</sup> Giedrė Jankevičiūtė, "Įvadas / Foreword", in: *Lietuvos dailininkų sąjunga. Pirmoji knyga / Lithuanian Artists' Association. Volume I*, Vilnius: Artseria, 2002, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> It is a term describing the process which had the character of freedom in terms of producing and exhibiting artworks in Soviet Lithuania between 1962 and 1982, created and used by the curator and art critic Elona Lubytė as the title of the exhibition "Silent Modernism in Lithuania 1962–1982" (*Tylusis modernizmas Lietuvoje 1962–1982*) (1997, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius). See the catalogue *Tylusis modernizmas Lietuvoje 1962–1982*, Elona Lubytė (ed.), Vilnius: Tyto alba, 1997.



conformist Lithuanian painting”<sup>41</sup> which typically circulate in the theory of modern art in Lithuania<sup>42</sup>, we may notice that the understanding of possible conformist and non-conformist art has been often very much inscribed in the idea of belated modern art or, to be more exact, belated modern painting. That is why various examples of art which Dovilė Tumpytė has called “parallel chronologies in Lithuania”<sup>43</sup>, meaning the possible traces of art which would be closer to the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art in the 1970s and 1980s, fall out of any more consistent narrative about modern and contemporary art in Lithuania either in the discourse or in the permanent exhibition of National Gallery in Vilnius. Those possible traces include the site-specific installations by the artists Petras Mazūras and Kazimiera Zimblytė in Vladas Vildžiūnas’s garden in Jeruzalė in 1978 or the films by the experimental amateur filmmaker Artūras Barysas-Baras made between 1970 and 1984<sup>44</sup>. One of the most notable examples of such parallel traces of contemporary art could be the garden of the artist Kazimieras Vilius Orvidas in his home-*stead* in Plungė, created from various field-stones, wood, found objects, and crosses, in which hundreds of people were gathering on various occasions at that time<sup>45</sup>. The nature of such gatherings may be understood as being not so far away from that of manifestations of the “underground” movement in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s<sup>46</sup>: the basic differences seem to be in variety and

41 It is a term coined by art critic Alfonsas Andriuškevičius to describe the painters who created between 1956 and 1986, and were neither pure conformists nor non-conformists. According to him, the concept of semi-nonconformism could cover the majority of Lithuanian painters and their artworks of that time. See Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, *Lietuvių dailė: 1975–1995*, Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, 1997.

42 More about the discourse of dissidentism and artistic resistance in Soviet Lithuania and its significance for constituting the binary understanding of Lithuanian art in the Soviet times, see Milda Žvirblytė, “Sovietmečio dailės tyrimų istoriografija ir jos dekonstrukcija: Vinco Kisarausko (1934–1988) atvejis”. In: *Menotyra*, t. 20, No. 4, 2013, pp. 273–301. Žvirblytė also notices that the term of semi-nonconformism was suggested as a certain compromise, but only brought more uncertainty; however, the discourse of non-conformism is still widely used and seems meaningful, especially for the analysis of individual artists’ works (Milda Žvirblytė, *ibid.*, p. 274).

43 Dovilė Tumpytė, “Parallel Chronologies in Lithuania: What If...?”, in: *Atsedzot neredzamo pagātni / Recuperating the Invisible Past*, Ieva Astahovska (ed.), Rīga: Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2012, pp. 191–203.

44 More about the artworks, see Dovilė Tumpytė, *ibid.*

45 More about it, see Viktoras Liutkus, “Breaking the Barriers: Art Under the Pressure of Soviet Ideology from World War II to Glasnost”, in: *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, Alla Rosenfeld, Norton T. Dodge (eds.), Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey and Rutgers University Press, 2002, p. 310.

46 With advancing “normalization”, most of the life of the Czechoslovak underground movement as representing a crucial part of the unofficial cultural scene was occurring in isolated farms and villages, where village houses – communes – were used as platforms for cultural gatherings and festivals.

scale. However, be it only single cases as in Lithuania, or entire movements as in Czechoslovakia, they both are almost completely out of the narratives.

Thus, it is asserted that contemporary art in both current senses of the term as interdisciplinary and conceptual, and, especially, as completely global and international, in Lithuania started only after 1989. This understanding of “contemporary art” even served as “a certain rhetorical tool” in the struggle against the opponents of the newly established Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius (CAC), as the cultural theorist Skaidra Trilupaitytė describes it<sup>47</sup>. For instance, we may see how Kęstutis Kuizinas, the long-standing director of CAC since 1992, uses it while telling the story of Lithuanian art from 1988 to the end of the decade. He writes about contemporary art exhibitions organized by CAC in sharp opposition to the fine art created by the former conformist and non-conformist painters who still wanted to keep such questions as “nationality,” “originality,” “depth,” “relation of form and content” etc. alive, as well as not to lose “those minimal forms of incentives and guarantees that they enjoyed in Soviet times”. In his rhetoric, these artists were too much attached to the Soviet system of art, which he claimed to be fighting against. In contrast to that he put issues more related to the field of contemporary art, such as “interaction of arts,” “globalization of culture,” “relations between an individual and society,” and “other urgent problems of contemporary life,” as well as participation in exhibitions based on “artistic quality,” i.e. the principles of “non-political selection” and “free competition”<sup>48</sup>. As a result, unlike in the Czech or Polish contexts, in Lithuania the understanding of differences between modern and contemporary art is particularly binary<sup>49</sup>.

47 Skaidra Trilupaitytė, “Kas skaičiuoja nepriklausomo meno dešimtmečius? / Who is Counting the Decades of Independent Art?”, in: *(Ne)priklausomo šiuolaikinio meno istorijos: savivaldos ir iniciatyvos Lietuvoje 1987–2011 m. / (In)dependent Contemporary Art Histories: Artist-Run Initiatives in Lithuania 1987–2011*, Vytautas Michelkevičius, Kęstutis Šapoka (eds.), Vilnius: Tarpdisciplininio meno kūrėjų sąjunga (LTMKS), 2011, p. 45.

48 Kęstutis Kuizinas, “Lithuanian Art from 1988 to the Present”, in: *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, Alla Rosenfeld, Norton T. Dodge (eds.), Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey and Rutgers University Press, 2002, pp. 356, 360.

49 Perhaps it could be one of the reasons why even the new museum of modern art MO, opened in Vilnius in 2018, in which the majority of exhibits were created after 1989, still calls itself “modern” instead of “contemporary”.

## Conclusion

Comparing three concrete cases of post-socialist countries, we tried to answer the question how diverse changes of political regimes influenced the ways of presenting and canonizing the development of modern and contemporary art in the post real-socialist region. As the shifting point, we took the breakthrough year of 1989, respectively the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, which besides the restoration of independence and the demise of the real-socialist system, in the sphere of art is represented by the shifting conception and prevalence of the term “contemporary”. In this perspective, we tried to identify the regional divergences frequently perceived in quite homogenous terms and, for that matter, we detected three distinctive situations.

In the Czechoslovak and Lithuanian cases, we noticed a strong tendency of binarism affecting and distorting the understanding of developments in modern and contemporary art. In Czechoslovakia, where the distinction between official and unofficial was probably the strongest, established artists in the liberal 1960s took the spotlight from the 1970s and 1980s generation of unofficial artists and following 1989 extensively overshadowed them in their position of top representatives of original non-officially created art. In the Lithuanian case, the prevalent discourse of artistic resistance inaccurately engendered the idea of complete isolation between the 1960s and 1980s and shaped a very binary understanding of modern and contemporary art divided by the breaking point of 1989. In the Polish case, the distinction between regime-supported and unofficial art makes the least sense, since conceptual and performative art was created not necessarily outside the regime and the actual breakthrough of “alternative art” was an expression of “the third position” in the bipolar conflict cutting through Polish society in the 1980s. The turn of the 1980s and 1990s in our cases marks the moment of getting more unified and global, contemporary so to say, but are the notions of modern and contemporary art sufficient for writing a critical history of art in this region?

Submitted ——— 11/11/2018

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Santrauka

## Nuo Centrinės Europos iki Baltijos regiono prieš ir po 1989 m.: šiuolaikinio meno kanonų būklė

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*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* 1989 m., Centrinė ir Rytų Europa, modernus menas, šiuolaikinis menas, oficialus menas, neoficialus menas, pagrindis, kanonai.

Straipsnyje siekiama aptarti, kaip esminiai politinių režimų veikimo pokyčiai skirtingose Centrinės ir Rytų Europos regiono dalyse keitė modernaus ir šiuolaikinio meno raidos suvokimą, pristatymą ir kanonizavimą šiame regione. Ypač reikšmingas istorinis momentas – 1989-ųjų lūžis, kuris žymi ne tik nepriklausomybės atgavimą bei realiosios socialistinės sistemos panaikinimą, bet tuo pačiu meno lauke nurodo ir į tuometinio meno virsmą šiuolaikiniu – posūkį tarptautiškumo ir globalumo link. Siekiant identifikuoti ir suformuluoti tris savitas modernaus ir šiuolaikinio meno istorijų kanonizavimo situacijas Centrinės ir Rytų Europos regione, analizuojami trys istorijos steigimo būdai trijų konkrečių posocialistinių šalių istoriniuose ir įprastai homogeniškai vertinamuose meno raidos kontekstuose – tuometinėje Čekoslovakijoje, Lenkijoje ir Lietuvoje. Turint galvoje kanonus, pastebėta, kad Čekoslovakijos ir Lietuvos atvejais modernaus ir šiuolaikinio meno raidos suvokimą smarkiai veikia ir deformuoja stipri binarinio vertinimo tendencija. Čekoslovakijoje – ten, kur skirtis tarp oficialios ir neoficialios meninės veiklos galėjo būti ryškiausia, vertinant neoficialų meną, dėmesio centre atsidūrė dar iki XX a. 7 deš. pabaigos laisvoje meno scenoje įsitvirtinę menininkai, iki pat 1989 m. ir vėliau nustelbdami 8 ir 9 dešimtmečių menininkų kartos originalaus neoficialaus meno kūrėjus. Lietuvos atveju paplitęs meninės rezistencijos diskursas įtvirtino klaidingą požiūrį, kad sovietmečiu Lietuvos meno laukas buvo visiškai izoliuotas net

ir 7–9 dešimtmečiais ir suformavo ypač binarinį modernaus ir šiuolaikinio meno suvokimą, pagrįstą 1989-ųjų perskyra. Lenkijoje, kur šiuolaikinis menas buvo kuriamas nebūtinai už politinio režimo ribų, tikruoju „alternatyviuoju menu“ vertėtų laikyti meną, kurtą 9 dešimtmečio socialinio konflikto metu renkantis „trečiąją poziciją“. 1989-ųjų lūžis žymi momentą, kai tapome panašesni ir globalesni – taigi ir šiuolaikiškesni, bet, ar rašant kritinę šio regiono meno istoriją, modernaus ir šiuolaikinio meno sampratos yra pakankamos?