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Cultural Animation in Post-Soviet Lithuania

Let me start from a personal story. Part of my time I'm working as an exhibition curator in the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius. This biggest state gallery for contemporary art was established in early 1990s in the former Soviet Palace of Exhibitions. From the very beginning the CAC declared a conscious break-up with the Soviet past and clear orientation towards the West. From 2001 there is a sentence created by conceptual artists Pierre Bismuth and Jonathan Monk on the façade wall of the CAC: "Everyone is an artist but only artists know that". The same year I met two ladies from Sweden who came to Vilnius to make contacts. They wanted to invite some Lithuanian artists to realize a common project with local community in their Kultur huset in a small town somewhere in Sweden and asked me for recommendation. I told them that here, in post-soviet country, the idea for the artist to go to work with some local community would certainly remind the history of famous Soviet houses of culture. And that I'm not sure if anybody would be interested in it. Instead of recommending any artists I took these ladies to the former Culture House of Railway Workers built in 1956 and showed them a huge metal hook hanged on the façade of this Stalinist building by Lithuanian artist Mindaugas Navakas in 1994. I explained to my guests that this ugly and ironic object here on the building from the totalitarian past expresses how Lithuanian artists deal with our recent history. And that maybe it can also be a sign of lost sense of *the communal* itself.

Some years later the CAC showed the exhibition called "Populism" in which Lithuanian artists' couple Gediminas & Nomeda Urbonas were invited to take a part. A project produced for that exhibition was called "Pro-test lab" and was one of the first examples of socially engaged and community based art projects in post-soviet Lithuania. "Pro-test lab" was created as a space for community activities and actions at the entrance hall of the largest cinema in Vilnius, called "Lietuva" (which means "Lithuania" in Lithuanian). Built in 1965 this

cinema was known as a place for non-commercial films for many years. In 2005 the cinema theatre was privatized to be destroyed and replaced by some commercial building as it happened with many other cinema theatres, concert halls, swimming pools, public squares and parks in Lithuania in the 1990s. “Pro-test lab” gathered together different communities of Vilnius citizens (from architecture students to the New Left activists) and initiated different forms of protest against privatization of public space as well as a counter movement in style-life and fashion. Among many other actions the “Talk show with politicians” (2005 April) about privatization and public interest took place in the “Pro-test lab” space, there was also a food event called “Spanish afternoon” (2005 May), an action-game “V.I.P. Market” (2005 April) where participants displayed cardboard models of famous public buildings as for a sale, an action “Sold Out” (where a group of citizens were hanging huge banners with a word “Sold out” on bridges and other public buildings and monuments every Sunday morning in spring 2005), an action “Human Chain of Swimming Enthusiasts” (2005 May) to protest against privatization and demolition of famous public swimming pool, an action “America will help us” (2005 June) organized remembering a visit by George W. Bush to Lithuania in 2002 and his famous declaration that from now on any enemy of Lithuania is an enemy of the US. This time participants of the action asked president of the US to protect “Lithuania” from... Lithuania.

Unfortunately the “Pro-test lab” didn’t achieve its goal to stop the final privatization of cinema theatre “Lietuva”. Four members of the protest community were sentenced by the state court to compensate private company for interruption which caused a delay in building a new commercial building. But the point is not that a capital always wins in capitalism. The point is that a cultural animation appeared here too late, after the privatization already has been happened. So, let’s talk about reasons why culture animation or its ideas came to Lithuania so late.

First of all, a term “cultural animation” is not in use neither in public nor in academic discourse in Lithuania. As we know this term comes from French term “animation socio-culturel” which describes activities within a community.

In English speaking world more common terms are “community arts” (in the UK) or “community cultural development” (to use a phrase by American Arlene Goldbard). Ideologically both French and English terms are connected to the social processes of the 1960s. As we know it was a decade when different social movement for human rights came to force - such as feminism, movements of racial, religious, sexual minorities, counter-culture movements and so on. These social movements were against universal notion of human being as a white heterosexual middle-class man and focused on the idea of social diversity and a notion of human being as a one having independent, critical approach to reality. In this context cultural animation used the communal as a tool to liberate different identities and to enable different social groups to speak their own voice.

Here, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the 1960s meant different. If the West witnessed a new beginning in social self-awareness and a rise of social activism (which, we might say, was very much of socialist attitude), the Eastern societies were losing their last hopes in “socialism with a human face” in the end of 1960s. It is symbolical to speak about it here, in Prague, as it was this city which was invaded by Soviet military forces to stop democratic reforms known as the Prague Spring in August 1968. Coming back to cultural animation - can we find anything similar to Western ideas of cultural animation from 1960s in cultural policy or in cultural life of Soviet Union of which Republic of Socialist Lithuania was a part? Did the idea of culture as an active site where everybody has a right to participate exist in Soviet system? And if this idea existed, was it realized and how?

The idea that culture is for everyone and culture should be created by everyone was a driving force of official cultural policy in Soviet Union. The artists were required to create art which would be comprehensible for “the people”. The 1960s was that decade when the artists have been usually sent to the factories, military camps and collective farms (*kolkhozes*) to meet ordinary people and learn about their lives to be able to depict it in a socialist realist style. The Artists’ Union was responsible for organizing traveling exhibitions to smaller towns and villages thus bringing art closer to non-artistic audience. A

significant part of official culture life was mass festivals where non-professional art collectives participated together with professional ones. But the most important program which was implemented by the State was a network of so called Soviet houses of culture. In Lithuania the houses of culture were started to be established in the post-war period right after the second Soviet occupation in 1945. They were created according to the model of Soviet Russian workers' club - in the beginning mostly it was a club-reading room which operated in the same building with local administration. Today one can easily imagine that these places were created as a site for ideological education and propaganda. As such they were especially important right after Soviet occupation in small villages in Lithuania where people were forced to give up their property to the State and to join newly formed collective farms (*kolkhozes*). In the 1960s every town and village in Soviet Lithuania already had its own house of culture where different cultural activities were taken by local residents. There were non-professional theatre collectives, folk music and dance groups, dance groups for senior people, women singing groups, ethnographic research groups, agit-prop collectives and so on. Houses of culture also had libraries with a reading room and a small museum of local history. In smaller villages a house of culture also served as a place for celebrating birthdays, having funerals and similar events from private life of local people. Needless to say that during Soviet period a house of culture in many places became a center of any communal activities and life.

So, we can trace some parallels of cultural animation as a cultural work within community in the West and the East. But a function of cultural animation on these two sides of the Iron Curtain was rather different. If in the West an idea of cultural animation was based on liberating education and rising self-awareness through cultural practice, in the East cultural work was the State's attempt to control people's leisure and private life by means of cultural practice. For example, in Lithuania, which is strongly catholic country, Soviet houses of culture were supposed to substitute a church as according to Soviet ideology religion was first enemy to socialist people. Instead of religious practices Soviet people were invited to create culture themselves and participate in cultural rather than in religious rituals. Other example is about what kind of cultural

activities were promoted in the Soviet houses of culture. Mostly it was activities based on ethnographical tradition - like singing folk songs and dancing folk dances - which was not necessarily most interesting form for self-expression to all generations and especially for urban youth. Any movement of counter-culture was treated as evil coming from capitalist West. So the aim of Soviet house of culture was not to reinforce local (or interest) community and its self-awareness but to create a new community of socialist people and manipulate it. That's why elaborated network of Soviet houses of culture can be seen as a tool of social engineering which discredited a sense of *the communal* itself.

So, it's no wonder that after Lithuania gained its independence in 1990 most of former houses of culture were abandoned. First of all, in a physical sense because the State stopped to finance these institutions and not all local municipalities were able to support huge, non-economical buildings. Secondly, the 1990s was a complicated transitional period for culture practitioners themselves - they had to move from institution-based to project-based cultural work. Now they needed not only artistic or philological education (as it was during Soviet time when, for example, directing of non-professional theatre was one of most popular specialities among cultural workers). Now they also needed skills in cultural management. And here the biggest problem appeared within educational system. Roughly speaking, there are three separate fields of studies connected to cultural work in contemporary Lithuanian universities. First is devoted to conventional studies of professional art - it means different art practices, or art history and theory. The second is connected with non-professional art - like, for example, directing of non-professional theatre. And the third field covers cultural management which becomes more and more popular among young people to study.

But the separation of these three fields seems problematic looking from the perspective of cultural animation. First of all, it is focused on the division between "high" (professional) and "low" (non-professional) culture. That's why so many non-professional theatres, for example, are just imitating "high" professional theatre in staging conventional dramaturgy, applying conventional acting principles and not looking for alternative, issue-specific or audience-

specific material more connected with local history and local situations. Secondly, studies of cultural management now are mostly focused upon product-based rather than process-based activities. What do I mean? The object of cultural management as it is understood in Lithuania now is art and culture itself + its consumption. Whereas the object of cultural animation is self-expression of individual through art and culture. The aim of cultural management is a quality of cultural product and its market value. Whereas the aim of cultural animation is a creativity of individual and different social groups. So, the function of cultural management would be cultural and commercial, whereas the function of cultural animation would be cultural and social. That's why, for example, a museum management in today's Lithuania is aimed to raise a quantity of audience but not a diversity of audience.

Maybe a solution in this situation could be integrated studies which 1) avoid a barrier between "low" and "high"; 2) include more sociological and anthropological disciplines alongside conventional theory and practice of art or culture management; 3) are based on practice during studying time. Otherwise cultural animation in Lithuania will depend mostly on separate individuals and their creative, sometimes successive projects as it is now. Which is not bad. If it would be more of them than of the projects which just remind history of Soviet house of culture.