

Post-Soviet Writing of History: The Case of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius

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This article concentrates on the problems of history writing in contemporary Lithuania through the case study of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, opened in 2009. The museum is conceived as a site of history writing through its strategies of selecting, contextualising and displaying artefacts. Analysis of the museum's permanent exhibition shows how the critique of the modernist canon of art history collides with residues of socialist modernism, thus forming a specific post-Soviet narrative of history. This article also focuses on the process of establishing the new museum in order to reveal how this site of history writing is perceived in the public imagination of contemporary society.

In June 2009, following more than twenty years of discussion, planning and construction work, the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, a branch of the Lithuanian Art Museum, opened to become the main institution for exhibiting the history of the visual arts from 1900 to the present. As part of the recent boom in the former Eastern bloc for building new museums of modern art¹, the National Gallery was also intended to fill a long-standing gap in the museological narrative of Lithuanian modern art. Previously, only fragments of modern art history had been shown in a number of temporary exhibitions and in the permanent displays of other art museums.² Therefore, it is not surprising that the opening of the National Gallery, and especially its permanent exhibition of Lithuanian modern and contemporary art, was highly anticipated and attracted a lot of attention from the local and international audience, which eventually erupted into heated debate, firstly among members of the local art world. Leaving aside the complete programme of the new museum, which is not limited to permanent

1 Other examples from the region include: Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, opened in 2006; Contemporary Art Museum in Riga, which is presently under construction and due to be open in 2011; and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, which is under construction and due to be open in 2014.

2 Since 1989, following the closure of the Lithuanian Art Museum's short-lived permanent exhibition of Soviet art, the history of art from the second half of the twentieth century has not been represented by any permanent display in Lithuanian museums. Following the closure in 1994 of the permanent exhibition covering that period at the Lithuanian Art Museum, the main venue for exhibiting art of the first part of the twentieth century became the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum in Kaunas.

exhibitions³, this paper focuses on questions raised by public responses to the museum that relate to the National Gallery as a specific site of post-Soviet memory and history writing.

The process of creating the National Gallery in Vilnius has had a long history that shows its symbolic place in the public imagination and reveals some important features of the post-Soviet mentality, so the first part of this article is devoted to the history of the museum itself. Here, the various visions and demands for the future museum, as well as interpretations of the actual museum building itself, will be analysed in order to present the ways in which contemporary society projected the museum of modern art as a site of memory. The second part of this article offers a reading of the museum's permanent exhibition in order to show how its narrative is constructed and the values it communicates. The construction of the museum exhibition is analysed in the context of contemporary art-historical writing in Lithuania with the aim of clarifying the different models of historical thinking that have shaped the exhibition and provoked public controversy. The main aim of this text is to discuss the broader field of post-Soviet work on memory and history writing presently being done by both the museum institutions and their public audience, whose responses form an important part of the research material for this article.

French historian Pierre Nora has included museums, in addition to monuments, libraries, archives etc., among those sites of memory that, rather than simply evoking memory, construct history by selecting images from the past. He argued that nowadays there exist '*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory',⁴ The emergence of these sites of memory began in the nineteenth century and has led to a boom during the past thirty years – a boom that, according to Nora, compensates for the lack of living memory that has emerged due to the acceleration of history. In his more recent writing Nora notes that, along with general acceleration of history in modern society caused by the shift from industrial to post-industrial capitalism, the democratisation of history is yet another reason for the current upsurge in memory.⁵ The democratisation of history means the emergence of the memories of recently liberated minority groups, including the resumption of national memories previously confiscated by totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, beginning in 1989. Following this logic, it could be argued that the current boom in all types of museums in the former Eastern bloc is connected to both

3 Housed in a building of over 10,000 square metres, the National Gallery of Art consists of ten exhibition halls and a grand exhibition hall, an auditorium, information centre, education centre, storage, administrative offices, bookshop, and a café. The goals of the museum are described as follows: 'NGA is a contemporaneous, multifunctional centre for art and culture seeking a dialogue with society. This is a space for active communication where the audience can see the permanent exposition and temporary exhibitions as well as participate in cultural events, lectures and educational programmes.' (<http://www.ndg.lt/>; accessed 16 June 2010.) In its opening year, the museum hosted two large-scale temporary exhibitions: *Spalvų ir garsų dialogai. Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio ir amžininkų kūryba / Dialogues of Colour and Sound. Works by Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and His Contemporaries*, commissioned by the museum, and a travelling exhibition by the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, entitled *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*.

4 P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. – *Representations* 1989, no. 26, p. 7.

5 P. Nora, *Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory*. – *Eurozine* 19 April 2002, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html> (accessed 16 June 2010).

the neo-liberal appropriation of culture as an important economic sector and post-Soviet attempts to reaffirm national identity.

However, the making of the new museum in Vilnius is more complex than Nora's work suggests. It seems that in post-Soviet culture *lieux de mémoire* may not always simply replace *milieux de mémoire*, but the two may co-exist as an ambiguous space where the remnants of the recent (Soviet) past are used and re-used for new historical interpretations. What is more important is that such specific sites of memory, which simultaneously offer one or another version of history, will inevitably continue to evoke the vivid personal memories of living people, and which differ from institutional representations of history. In this paper I will also expand and problematise the notion of *lieu de mémoire* by speaking of the museum as a site of contention as defined by Susan A. Crane. In her research into the public controversies that have arisen with regard to the representation of history in museums, Crane argues that the museum is not only a memory institution that produces historical consciousness, but it is also a site of contention: a place where living personal memory meets national history, and individual expectations meet institutional or academic intentions.⁶ As demonstrated by the twists and turns of the process of establishing the new museum in Vilnius and the public controversy over its exhibitions, the National Gallery of Art is precisely that kind of place.

History of the museum

As a site of memory, the new museum in Vilnius is related to the idea of a nation.⁷ In the catalogue of its first temporary exhibition, dedicated to early twentieth-century Lithuanian artist Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and his fellow artists, Romualdas Budrys, director of the Lithuanian Art Museum, stated: 'The reopening of the National Gallery of Art, and the opening of its first international exhibition, is a cultural event that is significant in many ways. It is also the fruit of the idea of the *Home of the Nation* that Čiurlionis and his contemporaries Petras Rimša, Antanas Žmuidzinaičius and other artists nurtured a hundred years ago.'⁸ Budrys refers to the idea that had first blossomed among the activists of the Lithuanian national revival in the early twentieth century: to establish a cultural centre in Vilnius in order to symbolise their vision of a national state – in a country which at that time belonged to the tsarist Russian empire. According to Čiurlionis and his contemporaries, the 'Home of the Nation' would consist of concert halls, theatre halls and exhibition halls, in addition to the museum. Bearing in mind that the museum as a public institution emerged along with the modern state, the idea was characteristic of Western modernity and has been 'the site of a

6 S. A. Crane, *Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum*. – *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*. Ed. B. M. Carbonell. Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 319.

7 The original National Gallery of Art was established in 1993 and exhibited a collection of folk art and works by émigré artist Vytautas Kašuba until the building was closed in 1999 due to its poor state of repair.

8 R. Budrys, *The First Exhibition at the National Gallery of Art*. – *Spalvų ir garsų dialogai. Mikalojaus Konstantino Čiurlionio ir amžininkų kūryba / Dialogues of Colour and Sound: Works by Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis and His Contemporaries*. Ex. cat. Eds. A. Čepauskaitė, H. Šabasevičius. Vilnius: Lithuanian Art Museum, 2009, p. 4.

symbolic transaction between the visitor and the state' from the very beginning.⁹ The idea of the 'Home of the Nation' was not realised in Lithuania under the tsarist empire, but just a few years after the establishment of the independent Lithuanian state in 1918 a national gallery was opened in Kaunas, the capital of the new nation-state until 1939. Presently, it is called the M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum.

Today, linking the origins of the new museum with the hundred-year-old idea of 'Home of the Nation' seems like an anachronistic relic of nationalist thought. However, the establishment of the National Gallery of Art is directly linked to significant events in Lithuania's recent history. The idea of founding the museum of modern art emerged as early as the 1980s; the first public declarations (from the Artists' Union of Soviet Lithuania) appeared in 1987¹⁰, at the beginning of the Lithuanian national revival. The dream of the museum coincided with dreams of political independence for the state. The political character of the project was expressed particularly strongly during heated public debate about where in the city the new museum should be located. Participants in the debate asked for a symbolically and historically significant site for the museum: for example, the grounds of the Lower Castle, which had been a royal palace during the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.¹¹ Being a product of the late 1980s' national revival, the image of the National Gallery as a ritual site, reminiscent of a temple, remained vivid into the 1990s. For instance, in 1997, the press published the proposal of the painter Povilas Ričardas Vaitekūnas, envisioning a new modern building in the city's main square: its main feature would be a 'glass cross' – two glass passages intersecting at the centre of the building that would serve as the only windows for natural light and through which the nearby church would be visible. 'While the Louvre has a glass pyramid, we would have a glass cross' – with this comparison the artist intended to share his imaginative vision, but at the same time giving expression to the kind of grand expectations that many people had of the new museum.¹²

In spite of the firmly nationalist and past-oriented discourse about the establishment of the new museum and the symbolism of its potential location, in 2002 the decision was made to establish the National Gallery in a historically ambiguous place: in the building of the former Museum of Revolution of the Lithuanian SSR (fig. 1). The building is located in a modern urban space, on the bank of the river Neris and outside the historical centre of Vilnius. Today, this is an area of a newly emerging business and entertainment centres, and choosing this location for the new museum seems to correspond to the neo-liberal conception of creative industries.

On the one hand, the building can be approached as an architectural object. Designed in 1966 by young Lithuanian architects Gediminas Baravykas and Vytautas

9 C. Duncan, A. Wallach, *The Universal Survey Museum*. – *Museum Studies*, p. 59. The analysis of the Louvre, which was nationalised following the French revolution, in the influential essay by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach (1980) shows it to be one of the main prototypes for a national gallery.

10 Not only was the idea proposed during the congress of the Artists' Union of Lithuanian SSR, but there also began a spontaneous collection of funds for the future gallery. Cf. S. Trilupaitytė, *Istorijos versija ir kolekcijos vizija [A vision of the collection and historical versions]*. – *Dailė* 2002, no. 1, p. 13.

11 S. Trilupaitytė, *Istorijos versija ir kolekcijos vizija*, p. 13.

12 *Lukiškės – Turgaus, Lenino, Tautos kančių aikštė? Su Povilu Ričardu Vaitekūnu kalbasi Linas Vildžiūnas [Lukiškės square – the square of market, Lenin, or national suffering? Linas Vildžiūnas talks to Povilas Ričardas Vaitekūnas]*. – *7 meno dienos* 31 January 1997, p. 8.

Vielius, and constructed in 1980, it represents the local heritage of late Soviet modernism. From the formal point of view, the structure, made up by several light cubes of various sizes, has been rated among the best examples of Lithuanian modernist architecture – a beautiful ‘symbiosis between complexity and simplicity’.¹³ In order to meet contemporary requirements for the new museum, the building underwent reconstruction involving the addition of new elements of contemporary architecture, while respecting and preserving the original architecture of the gallery as a valuable item of Lithuanian modernist heritage (fig. 2). The competition for the reconstruction and expansion of the building was organised in 2003 by the Lithuanian Art Museum and the Architects Association of Lithuania. The winning project by architects Audrius Bučas, Darius Čaplinskas and Gintaras Kuginys was completed in 2009.

On the other hand, the building is not only a representation of an architectural achievement, but also a symbolical site of history writing: from 1980 to 1991, the Museum of Revolution of the Lithuanian SSR was engaged in writing the official history of Lithuania and presented it through the prism of socialist revolution. The building was handed over to the Lithuanian Art Museum in 1991, and then immediately became used to present ‘the other side’ of Lithuania’s modern history: from 1993 to 1999, the building housed an exhibition of Lithuanian émigré art. Thus, in the 1990s, the building underwent a process of exorcism, so typical to post-communist memory culture in general; this process was to be completed by architectural renovation.¹⁴ The renovation project was both huge and expensive, because the original building had been constructed poorly and from low-quality materials. During reconstruction, almost everything except the basic structure was replaced (fig. 3). As art critic Simon Rees remarked, the architectural reconstruction ‘...separates the design and the build: the design is credited as Lithuanian architecture and the materiality of the resulting building is denoted as Soviet. [...] The National Art Gallery is a symbol being rebuilt from the rubble.’¹⁵

Following this act of exorcism, the building of the former Museum of Revolution of LSSR became itself a museum object. As Lolita Jablonskienė, the head of the National Gallery, put it: ‘After the reconstruction, the very building of the gallery became a museum piece: I think that its shapes and spaces represent Lithuanian history and culture of the twentieth and twenty-first century just as perfectly as the story that the artworks construct. In other words, this kind of architecture helps us to place the narratives created in the gallery.’¹⁶ The architecture of the National Gallery had been turned into

13 R. Buivydas, *Architektas Gediminas Baravykas. Kūrybos pulsas* [Architect Gediminas Baravykas: the pulse of creation]. Vilnius: Archiforma, 2000, p. 28.

14 Another significant example of such exorcism of Soviet heritage is Grūtas Park, an open-air museum of Soviet sculpture established in southern Lithuania in 2001. About a hundred Soviet monuments, dismounted in 1989–1991, have been relocated to the forest. As Malcolm Miles observed, ‘the dark green of forest seems, in a way, to be the de-contextualising equivalent of the white walls of a typical museum of modern art’ (M. Miles, *Appropriating the ex-Cold War. – Meno istorija ir kritika / Art History & Criticism* 3. Menas ir politika: Rytų Europos atvejai / Art and Politics: Case-studies from Eastern Europe. Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2007, p. 173).

15 S. Rees, *Fraying at the Edges: Carpets and Paintings by David Mabb. – David Mabb: Menas kasdienybei / David Mabb: Art into Everyday Life*. Ex. cat. Ed. S. Rees. Vilnius: Contemporary Art Centre, 2006, p. 34.

16 *Dailės galerija – ne enciklopedija*. Su Nacionalinės dailės galerijos vedėja Lolita Jablonskiene kalbasi Alfonsas Andriuškevičius [Art gallery is not an encyclopaedia: Alfonsas Andriuškevičius talks to the head of the National Gallery of Art, Lolita Jablonskienė]. – *Šiaurės Atėnai* 18 September 2009, p. 6.

a museum object, separated from its original purpose and context (as often happens to museum objects)¹⁷, and became open for various interpretations and misinterpretations. This is evident in the various descriptions of spatial experiences by museum visitors who have expressed their opinion about the museum through remarks about the space.

For example, those who criticised the museum negatively associated its huge, empty and clinical spaces, so characteristic of modernist architecture, with a kind of post-Soviet mania for building too large and too chaotically.¹⁸ Meanwhile, advocates of the museum interpreted the renovated building and its surroundings as having returned the true value of the building – de-ideologising it as a modernist piece of art. As one reviewer argued: despite the fact that the building was designed for ideological purposes, ‘the true art escapes from the trap of ideology. The architect saw the building primarily as a museum, whose function is to shelter, to save, to show, to educate and to inspire others for creative work’.¹⁹ The reviewer then continues with an a-historical interpretation of the monument that stands by the entrance to the gallery: a statue entitled *The First Swallows* (*Pirmosios kregždės*). Although the statue was designed as a monument to the Soviet cosmonauts in 1964 and was erected next to the Museum of Revolution in 1987 (fig. 4), it now provokes quite different interpretations: ‘If we look from the city centre and the old town at the opposite bank of the river, we will see a large undeveloped space with *The First Swallows* by sculptor Juozas Mikėnas – a statue symbolising Lithuania, whose hand lets out the birds of freedom, the heralds of spring.’²⁰ Public responses to the new museum show that de-contextualised historical locations are especially convenient sites for generating new and competing versions of the past.

History inside the museum

The National Gallery’s presentation of the history of modern and contemporary art is also marked by different narratives that reveal the contentious nature of the museum itself. At the long-awaited opening of the museum, the permanent exhibition caused controversy among both museum professionals and museum visitors. This was not only because the museum was immediately a site where living memory and institutional memory appeared to collide: museum visitors started counting those artists who were included in the new official art discourse and those who were not, and comparing their own personal imaginary museums with the story being offered by the actual

17 In his famous critique of the museum Theodor Adorno relates museum with the German word ‘museal’ which ‘describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship’. ‘Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. [...] They testify to the neutralization of culture.’ (T. W. Adorno, Valéry Proust Museum. – T. W. Adorno, *Prisms*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997 [1967], p. 176.)

18 M. Skudutis, *Neišmokę istorijos pamokų: Nacionalinėje dailės galerijoje apsilankius* [Lessons of history that were not learned: after a visit to Lithuania’s National Gallery of Art]. – *Kultūros barai: kultūros ir meno mėnesinis žurnalas* 2009, no. 7/8, p. 33.

19 A. Žemaitytė, *Kartų polilogas modernioje erdvėje* [A polylogue of generations in the modern space]. – *Nemunas* 18 June 2009, p. 4.

20 A. Žemaitytė, *Kartų polilogas modernioje erdvėje*, p. 4.

display. The main reason for controversy was, as one reviewer put it, 'the clash between two different concepts of history writing, represented by two different generations of art researchers' who had participated in the making of the permanent exhibition.²¹

The concept and overall structure of the exhibition was the work of Lolita Jablonskienė and Jolita Mulevičiūtė, two art historians who belong to the middle generation of researchers that began writing a revisionist history of art during the early 1990s. However, the mode of display and the final selection of artworks were done by the aforementioned Romualdas Budrys, director of the Lithuanian Art Museum and a representative of the older generation of museum professionals. If we think, following Michel Foucault, of the writing of history as the production of knowledge and an act of power, then we ought to ask: who is writing?²² Today, it is hard to say who is the author of one or another visual narrative present in the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery. However, we can at least trace moments that reveal breaks and controversies in the visual narrative of the exhibition in order to speak about different ways of history writing.

The permanent exhibition space comprises nine galleries totalling 2,200 square metres; the display is divided by themes that more or less correspond to the typical chronology of traditional art-historical exhibitions.²³ The exhibition begins with national romanticist art of Lithuania under tsarist Russia, continues with modern art of the independent state between the two world wars, followed by artworks of the first Soviet year, and then the rest of the Soviet period, with the final exhibition hall containing contemporary art of the 1990s.

In the words of Lolita Jablonskienė, the curating of the exhibition 'relied on the current discourse of Lithuanian art history, bearing in mind that it might change in the future, expecting growth in research of particular periods of Lithuanian art (for instance, the Soviet period) and developments in museum exposition that will naturally grow along with them'.²⁴ It is true that in the contemporary history of Lithuanian art, the first part of the twentieth century has been the subject of far more research than the post-war period. The art-historical canon of the pre-war period was established in the early 1980s, with the publication of major works that defined the list of the most significant artists and styles.²⁵ This research was mainly based on the formal analysis and stylistic typology of artworks (using the obligatory ingredients of Soviet sociology), as well as on comparison between local art and Western modernism; it focused on those national artists whose activities were concentrated in Kaunas, which was temporarily the capital during the inter-war independence period.

21 G. Jankevičiūtė, Nacionalinė dailės galerija: pirmieji įspūdžiai [First impressions about the National Gallery of Art]. – Naujasis Židinys-Aidai 2009, no. 7, p. 282.

22 In questioning a discourse as a production of knowledge, Foucault begins with the question 'who is speaking?' (M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 55.)

23 The permanent exhibition also includes a separate gallery devoted to printmaking and photography which function as a site for temporary exhibitions.

24 Dailės galerija – ne enciklopedija, p. 6.

25 The most important publications from that period include a two-volume collective survey history and a monograph on Lithuanian painting: XX a. lietuvių dailės istorija [A history of the 20th-century Lithuanian art]. 2 vols. Gen. ed. I. Korsakaitė. Vilnius: Vaga, 1982, 1983; J. Umbrasas, *Lietuvių tapybos raida 1900–1940: srovės ir tendencijos* [The development of Lithuanian painting, 1900–1940: trends and tendencies]. Vilnius: Mokslas, 1987.

Since 1990, a new generation of art historians has begun to question the modernist canon of history writing, especially its emphasis on the autonomy of art, the Western influence on local art and the nationally homogenous art discourse.²⁶ Modernist assumptions about the autonomy of artistic practice were revised by studying the relations between the artwork and its cultural, social and political context, rather than focusing on the art object *per se*. This new scholarship began to analyse exhibitions, museums, art market, art education, art propaganda, state cultural policy, and so on. Comparison between the (Western) centre and the (Eastern) periphery, which had created a specific discourse of local art as being complementary and belated in relation to Western modernism, was questioned in at least two ways. On the one hand, by looking for the local historical roots of various modern movements, instead of emphasising Western influences. On the other hand, by exposing and examining that aspect of modernism that was not avant-garde (e.g. research into art deco and neo-traditionalism, trends that developed in inter-war Lithuania synchronically with international art life). Finally, the nationally homogenous art discourse was re-thought by research into multi-ethnic art life; for example, in the multicultural city of Vilnius in the early twentieth century. Revisionist art history by Lithuanian scholars emphasises the social conditions of the production, dissemination and consumption of art objects, thus echoing ideas of the social history of art as it has developed in the framework of the new art history.²⁷

The permanent exhibition of the National Gallery is partly based on the aforementioned non-canonical approaches towards the processes of modern art, especially in its structure, which breaks from the modernist dramaturgy of display based on style and, instead, proposes a thematic historical narrative.²⁸ The informational texts displayed in each of the nine galleries provide context and are written dialectically: they each present the art of the given period through a particular problem or topic, relating artistic practices to cultural, social and political contexts. For example, the section 'The New Art' is devoted to Lithuanian avant-garde art and is introduced via the complex cultural relationship between national tradition and European modernity that was characteristic of the new states in Eastern Europe after World War I. Meanwhile, the limits and potential of political and artistic freedom under the Soviet totalitarian regime are the focus of the introductory text in the gallery devoted to art during the Thaw period.

26 The new revisionist art history is largely represented by the following publications, studying the first part of the twentieth century: Art deco Lietuvoje [Art deco in Lithuania]. Ex. cat. Ed. G. Jankevičiūtė. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 1998; J. Mulevičiūtė, Modernizmo link: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940 [Towards modernism: the art scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918–1940]. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2001; L. Laučkaitė, Vilniaus dailė XX amžiaus pradžioje [Art of Vilnius in early 20th century]. Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002; G. Jankevičiūtė, Dailė ir valstybė: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940 [Art and state: the art scene in the Republic of Lithuania, 1918–1940]. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2003.

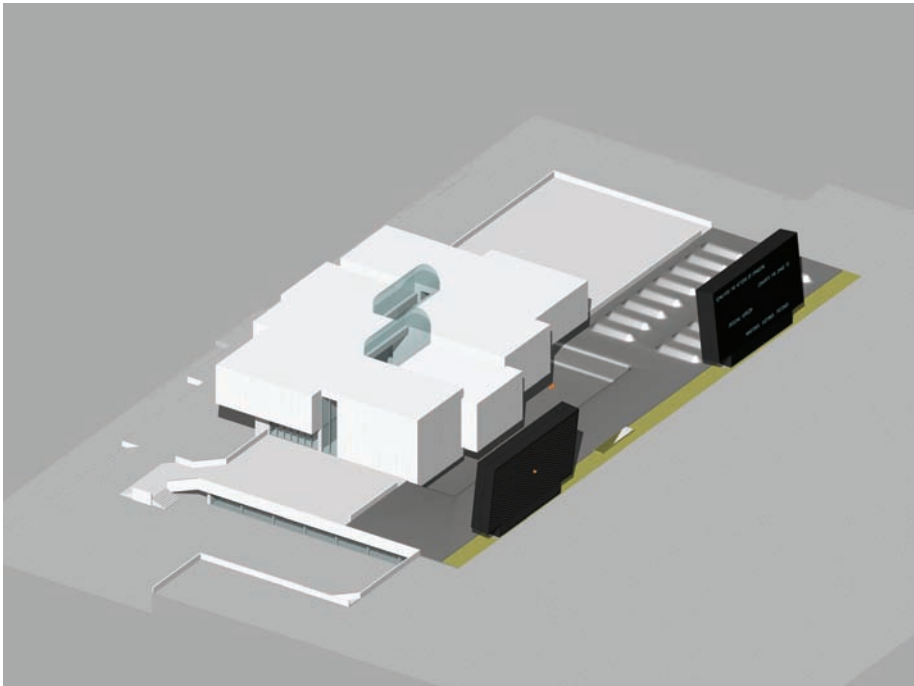
27 For a concise definition of the wide and diverse field of The New Art History, cf. J. Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. London, New York: Routledge, 2002. One should notice that while the social history of art prevails, other theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalysis, gender studies and postcolonialism remain almost entirely unexploited in Lithuanian contemporary writings on the art history of the twentieth century.

28 Each gallery has its own title which refers not to a style but to a theme related to the historical period: 'At the Crossroads of Epochs', 'Teachers and Students', 'The New Art', 'The Great Tradition', 'Art and Ideology', 'The Importance of Form', 'Between Myth and the Mundane', 'Borders of Reality', and 'Open Works'.



1.

The building of the former Museum of Revolution of the Lithuanian SSR before reconstruction.
Photo: archive of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.



2.

Audrius Bučas, Darius Čaplinskas and Gintaras Kuginis, model for the reconstruction and expansion of the building of the National Gallery of Art (2003).
Photo: archive of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.



3. Reconstruction of the building of the National Gallery of Art (2005).
Photo: Romas. Source: <http://www.miestai.net> (accessed 16 June 2010).



4. The National Gallery of Art, Vilnius (2009).
Photo: Giedrius Gulbinas.



5.

View from the section 'The Great Tradition', permanent exhibition of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius (2009). Photo: Vaidotas Aukštaitis. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.



6.

View from the section 'Art and Ideology', permanent exhibition of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius (2009). Photo: Vaidotas Aukštaitis. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.



7.

Works by Kazys Varnelis (USA) and Vladas Urbanavičius (Lithuania). View from the section 'Borders of Reality', permanent exhibition of the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius (2009).
Photo: Vaidotas Aukštaitis. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.



8.

Gintaras Makarevičius, *Hot* (1999). Video still.
Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Vilnius.

Based on most recent art-historical research, the permanent exhibition presents a broad range of modern art movements and styles from the inter-war period: not only avant-garde movements such as constructivism, cubism and expressionism, but also art deco and neo-traditionalism, which were of little interest in local art history until the 1990s (fig. 5). The exhibition of modern art shows the avant-garde and the traditional to be two different aspects of modernity that have coexisted, not just side by side, but also together within the work of an individual artist. The most important figure here is the painter Antanas Gudaitis (1904–1989), whose expressionist and neo-traditionalist works appear in three galleries devoted to modern art from the first part of the twentieth century.²⁹ The presentation of this artist's work using the problem-based rather than the chronological approach is particularly interesting: here the visitor encounters his later works first, before the earlier ones. Bearing in mind that Gudaitis belongs to the generation of Lithuanian artists who moved from the experimental to the traditional on the eve of World War II, this way of exhibiting seems more productive than a narrowly modernist narrative of the twentieth-century art that, as Carol Duncan has argued, typically shows the history of modern art as a progressive movement forward.³⁰

Alongside the works by Lithuanian artists, the permanent exhibition also presents Russian and Polish art, which dominated in Vilnius during both the tsarist period and in the inter-war period when the city belonged to Poland. At the same time, the art life in Kaunas during the 1920s and 1930s is presented as far more nationally homogenous and the rich heritage of Jewish art of the period is almost entirely left out. Another important aspect of the display is that alongside the art produced in Lithuania the exhibition also includes works by Lithuanian émigré artists, especially in the part devoted to the Soviet period.

Thus, the new models and principles of revisionist history writing play an important role in the construction of the exhibition's narrative, especially in the display of art from the first part of the twentieth century. Here, linear narrative meets the non-linear, national meets multinational, and the history of art meets the political. However, while the structure and textual narrative of the exhibition are evidently an attempt to avoid a modernist presentation of art history, the visual narrative of the display brings back many modernist – or socialist modernist – clichés and tells a different story.

A visitor to the exhibition first encounters a particular Soviet inversion of the modernist white cube: here, artworks hang next to each other, filling every space of every wall. It is not surprising that the first reviewers of the National Gallery saw the permanent exhibition as an avatar of Soviet socialist exhibitions: 'The result is reminiscent of the Brezhnev-era all-Republic survey exhibitions. The ten collection galleries (a combined 2,200 square metres) are crammed with approximately 400 works, despite being a space in which 250 would be appropriate. In a foolhardy attempt at democratization, no single work is highlighted or given a feature wall or space (in Soviet times every state-recognized artist had at least one work shown in the annual

29 Antanas Gudaitis is also represented in the gallery devoted to the Soviet period.

30 C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 108.

show).³¹ Moreover, the manner in which the artworks have been hung does not follow the dialectical logic of the structure (which demands that works which best represent the problem be clearly distinguished), but rather an aesthetical principle that puts together works from different historical contexts simply on the basis of their visual similarity (or some visual intrigue). If the densely packed display may be called 'socialist', then the principle of visual juxtaposition of artworks from different contexts is clearly 'modernist'.

The visual program of the exhibition appears to be a manifestation of the particular beliefs and values that the museum seems to want to communicate. The visual narrative stresses again the power of art's autonomy: for example, the history of Soviet art is told as a history of artistic invention, beginning with modern realism in the post-war period and ending with abstract art. The autonomy of art from reality is especially emphasised in the most controversial section 'Art and Ideology', which is related chronologically to the post-war years and to the imposition of the doctrine of socialist realism (fig. 6). This gallery is the midway point in a story of modern art and now brings the visitor to the Soviet period and its distinct notions and functions of artistic production; but instead of presenting socialist realism and the scale of its influence in Lithuanian art, the section tells a story about efforts made by Lithuanian artists to resist a foreign doctrine by means of modernist aesthetics. At this point the museum constructs a version of the history of Soviet art based on the discourse of resistance to the totalitarian regime, a story which has been accepted immediately and without criticism by some of the museum's visitors: 'the selection of artworks shows how Lithuanian artists managed to avoid ideological clichés'.³²

The modernist mode of display, based on the idea of art's autonomy, is also evident in the system of labelling used in the exhibition. Apart from didactic panels introducing the general theme of each section, no further information is provided about the individual works exhibited, except for the labels detailing institutional information. The didactic texts have been written by professional art historians and are mostly directed at visitors who are already educated in art, while the remaining visitors are left simply to enjoy the exhibition's visual narrative. As many critics of modern museums of art have argued, the de-contextualisation principles of modernist modes of displaying artworks produces a particular public, or rather it divides its audience between a cultivated public and a general one.³³ However, what is more important in this case is that the lack of context in the gallery's exhibition plays a significant role in determining the kind of art-historical narrative that is presented. For instance, the artworks that were produced and exhibited, both officially and unofficially, during the Soviet period, are juxtaposed with one another without any mention being made of their different meanings and status in relation to the totalitarian system. The exhibition also constructs a strong nationalist narrative by integrating émigré art into the Soviet period, purely on the basis of visual analogy, and without any reference to different historical contexts

31 S. Rees, NGA, Vilnius. – Frieze online 27 June 2009, http://www.frieze.com/comment/article/the_national_gallery_of_art (accessed 16 June 2010).

32 A. Žemaitytė, *Kartų polilogas modernioje erdveje*, p. 4.

33 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 170–173.

(fig. 7). Thus, the history of modern art in Lithuania is presented as a homogenous narrative of formal inventions and appears not to have been haunted by the spectres of twentieth-century history.

Romualdas Budrys, author of the visual program of the permanent exhibition, explains his conception as follows: 'You don't need a lot of stage direction for permanent exhibitions. Our main goal is a normal exposition of the best pieces of art, everything that we can be proud of. [...] You come and meet the values, and history as it really existed.'³⁴ Here, one should note two important points. First, such statements implicitly deny that a museum exhibition is essentially a form of constructing a narrative that represents history not 'as it happened' but merely as the current state of art history writing. Second, if one considers such a statement in the light of a comparison between the National Gallery and the 'Home of the Nation', we may assume that Budrys perceives the history of modern art in terms of a history of individual artistic achievements that embody the broader historical achievements of modern Lithuania. Of course, a museum is an ideological space where images of the past are created in accordance with the needs of the present, but we may still ask: what are our needs today?; do we need a museum to communicate 'eternal' and a-historical national values, or a museum to stimulate critical reflection upon the past?

Conclusions

At the end of the permanent exhibition of the National Gallery, the final object the visitor encounters is a video work by Gintaras Makarevičius called *Hot* (1999; fig. 8). The work documents a historical re-enactment of a meeting during which the artist invited the workers of a former Soviet factory awaiting closure to meet in the canteen – itself no longer functioning – and tell stories from their past. The memory of the workers was supposed to have been stimulated by a meal – hot dishes cooked according to thirty-year-old recipes. The artist wanted to show 'how much the past is vivid in people's memory'.³⁵ In the film, the workers really do eat Soviet-style dishes and propose toasts, but they speak of the present instead of the past. The museum also speaks more about the present than it does about the past. It focuses on the ideological needs and controversies of the present. Therefore, this video of a failed re-enactment may be taken symbolically as a meta-artwork for the entire permanent exhibition of the National Gallery. But perhaps the clash between two different conceptions of history writing, and the controversy it aroused, may also be interpreted as a productive sort of failure. Those moments of controversy may be productive because they reveal the artificial and historical nature of the museum itself as a place, to paraphrase Boris Groys, that is not a reflection and documentation of what 'really' happened, but where reality is in the process of construction.³⁶

³⁴ Romualdas Budrys: 'Kad ir ką darytume, vis tiek kam nors neįtiksimė' [Romualdas Budrys: 'Whatever we do, we can't please everyone']. – Kultūros barai: kultūros ir meno mėnesinis žurnalas 2009, no. 10, p. 38.

³⁵ The Scopic Regime at the Margins. Erika Grigoravičienė interviews Gintaras Makarevičius. – Emisija 2004 – ŠMC. Ex. cat. Ed. L. Dovydaitytė. Vilnius: Contemporary Art Centre, 2005, p. 41.

³⁶ B. Groys, *Art Power*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2008, p. 24.

As a site of the writing of history, the new museum in Vilnius unveils rather than conceals the two opposing models of art history that shape its permanent exhibitions: one based on the critique of the modernist canon of art-historical writing, and the other on the continuation of the basic modernist idea of the autonomy of art. The first model forms the conceptual structure of the narrative on display, telling a story of historically contextualised art processes rather than a story of artistic styles. Meanwhile, the second model shapes the visual narrative of the exhibition, emphasising the a-contextual nature of the artworks and a corresponding history of formal achievement. The coexistence of those two models of art-historical thinking in the execution of one of the main cultural projects in contemporary Lithuania does not only reveal the contradictions within the field of art history writing and museum making. As with the history of the creation of the museum as a 'Home of the Nation', the creation of history within the museum shows two politically divergent understandings of culture: culture as a part of complex history, and culture as a substitute for history that neutralises historical and social contradictions. The case of the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius demonstrates that the latter concept, inherited from the period when Lithuania was a part of the Russian empire and later the Soviet Union, remains vivid in post-Soviet memory.