

If You Build It, They Will Come: Europos Parkas

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Sculpture parks and open-air museums of modern and contemporary art throughout Europe and North America have established themselves as places of unique aesthetic experience. The marriage of art and nature in the Europos Parkas Open-Air Museum on the outskirts of the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius has become one of the most successful demonstrations of the transformative potential of artistic experience within a natural landscape. The inception of the museum coincided with the dramatic political and social changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s that were to affect both creative practice and aesthetic experience. During this period, contemporary art in the region developed a more pluralistic perspective, which included the use of a multitude of styles in the post-modern sense, such as object-oriented art, installation, performance, and an increased use of technology in artistic practice, such as photography, video, digital media. In response to this changed artistic atmosphere, many art and cultural institutions began to adapt their program in an effort to engage more fully in the dialogue of Western art discourses. Yet few have successfully transgressed the barriers separating the wider audience from Danto's art world and its specific language of interpretation, whilst maintaining the integrity of the works on display. This article seeks to explore how the phenomenon of Europos Parkas has constructed and mediated the contemporary at a unique historical moment.

In the Baltic region, as elsewhere in the post-East, there was a broadening of the notion of what constituted an art work during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this time, Lithuanian art continued its tentative exploration of abstraction, yet limited contact with Western art practices over previous decades had left much of the general public unfamiliar with its forms and theories. The arrival of increased information, contact and participation with the international art world, through projects such as Europos Parkas, supported artists in their increasing desire to create works that were more conceptual in form and explored the changed relationship between spectator and object. This changed artistic strategy was by its very nature resistant to the developing art market as the works could not be bought or displayed in a traditional sense. For audiences, the challenging nature of conceptual works, particularly sculptures that lacked the possibility of a literal interpretation, required a new approach to presentation. The exhibition of numerous large-scale conceptual works in the natural setting of Europos Parkas appears to be one of the most successful museum initiatives of the 1990s, drawing a large and varied audience of arts professionals and laymen from both home and abroad into the dialogue about the changed artistic atmosphere of Lithuania.

The Development of the Park

Europos Parkas is the culmination of the efforts of one man, Gintaras Karosas, who was born in 1968. In 1987, at the age of nineteen, he began to seek out a suitable place for the creation of an open-air sculpture park that would aim to bring the best of domestic and international modern sculpture to the region of Vilnius. Four years later, Karosas erected the first structure at the park, his *Symbol for Europos Parkas* (1991) that founded the ambitious project. Karosas' mandate for Europos Parkas,

To give artistic significance to the geographical centre (as determined by the French National Geographic Institute in 1989) of the European continent and to present the best of Lithuanian and international modern achievements¹

makes clear his desire for the integration of the post-East into the international art world. The geographic position of Europos Parkas in a region that has historically functioned as a crossroads of diverse cultures is heavily symbolic. As a place where history and politics have long been contested, the region of Vilnius is now a meeting point where artists and audiences are able to reflect on both art and nature in the new integrated world.

Karosas memorialised his pan-European sentiment in his work of 1996 *Monument to the Centre of Europe* that has become one of the park's main attractions. The completed structure took the form of a grey granite pyramid that is surrounded by a ring of granite plates upon which signs are chiselled that indicate the directions and distances to the forty-five European capitals; Vilnius 19km, London 1730km, Rome 1724km. This project, sponsored by the Macedonian government, The Embassy of the Republic of Germany in Lithuania, Baltexfilm and the representative of Fuji film in Lithuania demonstrates the multicultural history of the land close to the centre of Europe as well as the cross-cultural reality of the twenty-first century. Side-stepping popular debates concerning the level of integration of the post-East within the international mainstream, Karosas unflinchingly champions the right of Lithuania to be seen as unquestionably a relevant part of Europe and integral to European artistic practice.

The opening of the park in the year 1991 is significant and must be contextualised within the prevailing cultural and philosophical environment. The period surrounding Lithuanian independence was an expansive era. After decades of creative deprivation, there occurred what is best described as a cultural explosion, as projects, exhibitions and periodicals flooded the city. In most European imaginations, Vilnius may appear to be far from the centre of international art trends, yet the sheer dynamism of post-independence created a flourishing art scene attracting artists, curators and critics from across the globe who came to witness and participate in contemporary Lithuanian art. The combination of an increasingly de-centred art world² and the claim of Vilnius to be the geographic centre of New Europe placed Vilnius on the map in the imagination of the international art system. Yet the lack of a commensurably rich avant-garde heritage from which to draw³, and a limited number of artists practicing contemporary art forms, greatly limited the potential of Lithuania to become a full-scale contemporary art destination. However, by taking advantage of its unique and symbolic situation and landscape tradition, Karosas recognized the potential of his project to become the new definitive centre for open-air works.

The production of open-air sculpture, public art and large-scale works during this period of social and political transformation is of particular note. After decades of the repression of creative impulses, public expression became an important means by which artists and audiences could validate themselves and their identity out in the open, in real space. Throughout the region, a number of public works were commissioned that were to reflect the identity of the new Republic of Lithuania. There was much debate in the popular media and in political circles concerning the desired image⁴. As a result of the popular sentimentalised form of nationalism that prevailed⁵, many of the open-air projects of this period tended towards traditional aesthetic forms and illustrative works glorifying national heroes. One example of this was the reconstruction of small-scale, mostly figurative, War of Independence monuments from the first period of Lithuanian independence, 1918-1945. These were chosen for their power to evoke patriotic sympathy and became sites where diplomatic ceremonies could take place. These projects reflected a more popularist aesthetic than that shared by those interested in contemporary forms. There were relatively few opportunities for artists, critics and curators oriented towards modern and contemporary art developments to contribute to the discussion, although a few examples do exist. The most notable of these was the 1995 annual exhibition of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Riga, *Monument*, which invited artists to submit their ideas for a new public work that would reflect Latvia's new image. Eleven ideas were chosen for realisation, and were exhibited throughout the city-space, merging with the community and reflecting very different and often opposing ideals for the new nation.

Apart from the few examples⁶, only a small number of projects were actually realised that would integrate contemporary art into the popular community outside the white cube of the gallery. The development of Europos Parkas is therefore unique as a public, large-scale museum of modernist and contemporary works. It also indicates the strong desire of some arts professionals to steer clear of a more provincial approach to public space and representation, and to engage with the discourses of the art world beyond regional borders. However, the inherent difficulties of promoting contemporary abstract works to an audience that was resistant to contemporary art forms on a number of levels, historically, politically and nostalgically, resulting in little financial support for such works for public areas.

The development of the park to its present state was a slow and arduous process. The park was developed with minimal resources, apart from funding and organisational assistance from UNESCO and the Soros Foundation. Both the Lithuanian branch of UNESCO and the Soros Foundation⁷ provided tools and materials for the project, and contributed organisational support by way of establishing contact with artists' unions and academics all over the world. Taking advantage of the newly established laws governing non-profit institutions, Europos Parkas became one of the first non-state cultural organisations in Lithuania which in turn provided the park with opportunity to receive tax benefits and create a system of membership by which patrons could donate to the park. Initially such ventures were viewed with suspicion in Lithuania, however year by year, new projects were initiated that raised the profile and quality of the project. Having cleared much of the landscape for the park himself with a chainsaw that was sent to him by Canadian relatives, Karosas continued to add roads, signs, adequate parking, a kiosk and a restaurant to Europos Parkas to accommodate the increasing number of visitors.

Today the financial situation remains precarious, as it is for the arts in much of post-socialist Europe. The dwindling grants from Soros have been mostly replaced by income taken from admission fees, the restaurant and souvenir shop as well as a few private sponsors and educational programmes. Only five-percent of the annual budget is gained from the state for non-profit organisations such as Europos Parkas⁸, yet the success of the park is reflected in its plans to build an on-site Educational Centre in the spring of 2004, and in recent conferences held on museum education. The annual International Sculpture Symposium held at Europos Parkas has also helped raise the profile of the project. Each year, practitioners from all over the world including North America, the United Kingdom, Japan, Greece, Cyprus and the Baltic region meet to discuss new trends in sculpture and to create works that are added to the park's collection. The organisation of the annual symposium has placed Vilnius on the map as a destination for those interested in outdoor sculpture. This is indicated by the fact that some of the most established names in conceptual art and sculpture have now contributed to the collection. Sol LeWitt, Dennis Oppenheim, Ales Veseley, Magdalena Abakanowicz have all contributed to the landscape that is Europos Parkas, as have numerous others who have participated in the annual symposium.

In 1996, the first large-scale project was organised with the established American conceptualist Dennis Oppenheim entitled *Chair/Pool* that is able to hold more than two tons of water. Although Oppenheim was by all accounts sceptical at first, the project was completed within the limited time frame of only three weeks. Together, Oppenheim and Karosas raised the required funds for construction, and an assistant was sent to Vilnius with precise models and specifications to supervise construction at a local factory. The successful collaboration encouraged a second project by Oppenheim to be added to the collection, *Drinking Sculpture With Exposed Kidney Pool* in 1998, a large house-shaped construction that theoretically allows the form to rock back and forth, dipping the long ramp at its front into the water like a tongue.

The participation of Oppenheim in the Europos Parkas project encouraged more contributions to the collection by established practitioners. In 1997, the minimalist Sol LeWitt began production on his seminal work *Double Negative Pyramid* that consists of several thousand geometric concrete blocks arranged to accentuate the play of light and form. Magdalena Abakanowicz, after a visit to the park with art

critic Michael Benson, became involved by creating her own piece *Space of Unknown Growth* in 1998, a work of twenty-two variably sized boulders that have been formed to take on an egg-like shape. In accordance with Karosas' desire to retain the integrity of both the object and its surrounding landscape, works are chosen for the collection that do not drastically intervene in the natural surroundings. Instead, Abakanowicz's boulders and LeWitt's structure merge harmoniously with the surrounding woodland, retaining the integrity of the natural setting, using the play of light and form to create meaning, and accentuating a sense of place.

Exhibition and Experience

The demands made upon the visitor to create and interpret meaning at Europos Parkas take a different form from that of the traditional viewing experience. The nature of freestanding works requires the spectator to move around the piece to gain the continuously changing vantage point necessary to witness how the form evolves. Although this requires a level of audience participation that many in Lithuania are unaccustomed to, visitors are encouraged to walk around, look, experience, and in Karosas' work *For Your Convenience*, to sit on the works on display. This unusual atmosphere has been successful in encouraging audiences to participate and experience contemporary art forms in a non-threatening and less authoritative environment. The arrangement of the works within the park rejects the ideals of conventional landscape architecture, and is instead a sporadic reflection of art in nature. By taking sculptural works out of the white cube gallery and placing them in the chaotic space of nature, the exploration of the formal-sensory qualities and elements of the works are highlighted without the authoritarian discourses of the white cube. Three-dimensional object-based works have become popularised in urban galleries such as the Centre for Contemporary Art, Vilnius (CAC)⁹ that have consciously attempted to introduce new ways of seeing to an art public that is more competently versed in two-dimensional aesthetics. Yet the myriad of scale, materials, content and techniques employed in the works on display at Europos Parkas demands a new level of commitment and engagement on the part of the viewer.

Although the naturalistic setting of the park creates a casual, relaxed atmosphere, the non-literal and often challenging nature of many of the pieces on permanent display creates a barrier for audience appreciation. Questions raised by conceptual art often contest the notions of traditional art by highlighting the role of ideas in the production of art's meaning. This strategy is also being promoted by the developing educational programme at the park. Indeed, the raising of questions has become a central feature in recent Lithuanian art. By avoiding the sensationalist aspects of many of the exhibitions presented in traditional gallery spaces in the 1990s, Karosas succeeds in giving both experienced and inexperienced audiences the reflective setting necessary to look, listen, respect, appreciate and participate in outdoor sculpture and the landscape of the region.

Landscape continues to hold a central position in the Lithuanian artistic tradition and in the national imagination. In a region where geographic boundaries have directly affected social experience for centuries, the place of nature in the new Republic of Lithuania remains secure. The fact that much of the natural landscape has been ravaged by the industrial production of the late Soviet period has created an acute ecological awareness in the region; a movement that was mobilised during Lithuania's bid for independence¹⁰. Artists such as Deimantas Narkevicius and Arturas Raile continue to use landscape as a central feature of their video works in international exhibitions, yet on film, the natural setting remains removed from the reality of the experience. The level of displacement away from the content featured in video works creates yet another level of abstraction for many. In contrast, sculptures that exist in real space, that lay claim to the landscape, that may be directly engaged with through sight, touch and smell alter the experience of the viewer. The opportunity to access the art form on a number of levels, intellectually, physically, and emotionally, according to the knowledge and desire of the spectator has provided new

potential for audiences to learn, think, and engage with contemporary arts practice in a way that is both unusual and meaningful.

One of the most interesting and socially overt works in the permanent collection of Europos Parkas was added in the year 2000 by Karosas himself. The *LNK Infotree* is the largest sculpture in the world to be created out of disused television sets. Covering more than 3135 square meters, the 700m maze is created from three thousand bulky, broken, Soviet-era television sets. One hundred and fifty tons worth of broken technology was donated specifically for the project after an appeal in Lithuania's LNK television network. The result is a labyrinth that directly addresses the problem of technologically manipulated works. The silhouette of the sculpture from a birds-eye view takes the vague shape of a tree, an element of nature that can be found literally surrounding the work. A prone statue of the former socialist leader Lenin is found lying at its centre, defeated by the force of the natural environment. The television sets that once channelled communist ideology and images into the homes of millions create narrow paths through which the spectator may follow, symbolising their limitations. The television maze functions as a metaphor for the enslaved mind, and some may argue, Lithuania's winding path to independence; a claustrophobic technical world removed from nature, experience and ultimately truth. If truth is what is experienced directly from the physical senses, then for art to be experienced fully, it must be experienced in the physical world of form, smell and colours.

There exist a number of similar endeavours to Europos Parkas throughout the Baltic region, most notably the Pedvale Open-Air Museum in Sabile, Latvia. However, few of the projects in the region can boast the scale, success or contemporary awareness of Europos Parkas. After its first decade, the future of the park seems assured. Hosting over 60 000 visitors annually, both tourists and local audiences, the notable collection of significant sculptural works has fulfilled the needs of the growing audience for contemporary art and has provided a gateway to previously separate art worlds. The fifty five hectare sculpture park that covers woodlands, grasslands and a few natural springs, now displays over ninety works by artists from twenty-seven different countries and is supported by a team of twenty employees. In 1995 Karosas was selected by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of twenty young people who brought about important changes in Eastern and Central Europe. Locally, his success has been acknowledged by the City of Vilnius with a prestigious award and the Vilnius Academy of Fine Art where, as a student his idea had received little support, invited Karosas to return and complete his degree.

By addressing a broader audience and recognising the specific barriers to interpretation faced by audiences in the 1990s, Karosas has created a museum that truly fits the needs, audience and identity of contemporary Lithuania. This has been achieved by the museum's unusual strategy, its high quality works and its desire to engage with the rest of the world. From its inception, Karosas has placed a vast amount of importance on the experience that visitors come away with, because he knows that in order to transform a remote, yet central, corner of Europe into a lively and dynamic space, a variety of cultures, traditions and practices must be engaged.

¹ Gintaras Karosas, *Europos Parkas*, Vilnius 1997.

² Large-scale exhibitions are increasingly being produced in smaller urban cities away from the traditional arts centres. Kassel, Rostock, Malmo, Luxembourg and Vilnius have all recently held large international contemporary art exhibitions.

³ For comprehensive history of Lithuania's modern art, see S.A. Mansbach *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*, Cambridge 1999.

⁴ Helena Demakova, 'Monument Revisited' in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, New York 2002, 313.

⁵ For further reading see Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, London 1993.

⁶ Other artists who considered the place of monuments in the new national public life include Ekke Vali's *Monument to a Monument* shown at the Tallinn Art Hall in the spring of 1990. For further reading, see Heie Treier, 'Freedom of Choice: A Perspective on Estonian Art of the 1990s' in Valiku Vabadus, *1990. aastate Eesti kunst* Tallinn, 1999.

⁷ See website www.osf.lt for further information on the work of the Soros Foundation in Lithuania.

⁸ Email from Goda Sosnovskiene, Art Manager at Europos Parkas on August 19th, 2003.

⁹ See website www.cac.lt for their exhibition history.

¹⁰ In April 1996, the Chernobyl disaster gave massive impetus to ecological protest in the Baltic States, leading to the rejuvenation of civil action. For further reading, see Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence*, London 1993.