Author's Preface

After the collapse of the Central and Eastern European Communist bloc, the region experienced an acute identity crisis. The image of the Western world – demonised on the one hand and idealised on the other – got shattered when it collided with the new reality of long-sought freedom.

As the region proceeded to 'synchronise' with the West, it turned out that the process was riddled with contradictions. In Lithuania, during the 1990s, many art critics were comparing Lithuanian art with well-known names from the Western art world in their texts, although, as we shall see, this was often an empty ritual aimed at a (self-)therapeutic effect. After 2000, the systemic-institutional adoption of Western terminology reached the peak level of hyper-imitation, which was ultimately taken as a sign that the synchronisation with the Western axiological system has been achieved. And yet, despite the fact that independent Lithuania's contemporary art system and art criticism now span over three decades, this book contends that contradictions still abound, and that problematic questions do persist to the present day.

What's more, these contradictions have only multiplied and intensified in light of recent historical events: Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the unravelling of the global neoliberal order, which, as the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously suggested, was meant to represent the best of all possible worlds after the 'end of history'. For Lithuania (and, by extension, for other post-Soviet regions), this spelled the need to 'synchronise' with the West on an even more radical level.

This shifting geopolitical landscape has profound implications for the world of art, raising urgent questions about how global events and the intensified drive to 'synchronise' with the West shape the practices and frameworks of art criticism in post-Soviet regions. The book identifies a number of pressing questions that remain to be answered: How universal or global are the so-called tools of art criticism? To what extent is art critique

influenced by local history and/or geopolitical circumstances? Or perhaps the dilemma of 'synchronisation' is merely an expression of local neuroses, even infantile fixations and fantasies? Has Lithuanian art criticism managed to free itself from ideological influences since the 1990s? Is today's criticism truly as advanced and mature as once anticipated? How do these questions intersect with the socio-aesthetic changes that swept through Central and Eastern Europe after the Soviet collapse?

Concept and Methodology

Art criticism, particularly within the context of Central and Eastern Europe, and specifically Lithuania, presents a complex set of challenges. This book does not aim to be a prescriptive manual on 'how to write about contemporary art'. Instead, it explores a broader spectrum of issues. These include:

a) interconnections between art criticism, contemporary artistic practices, and philosophy (particularly aesthetics);

b) profound influence of historical and geopolitical factors on these domains;

c) and, ultimately, within this broader framework, the book delves into the evolution of the art critical discourse in Lithuania – the exploration that begins with the Soviet era and continues through the period of independence that which was proclaimed in 1990.

As an artist with a degree in art theory, I have been actively engaged in the fields of art criticism and curatorship for over fifteen years. More recently, I have also become involved in philosophical discourse as a researcher at the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. This multifaceted background provides me with a unique perspective, encompassing the distinct viewpoints of artists, critics, curators, and philosophers, which often diverge significantly.

Throughout the book, I may occasionally shift between these various perspectives, without fully subscribing to any single one. I acknowledge that this shifting may suggest inherent lack of a stable foundation. However, I embrace this ambiguity as a deliberate strategy, while recognising its value in dismantling the hierarchical relationships that often arise between these distinct professional areas.

This book explores the multifaceted concept of ideology, much like examining the layers of a cake. First, it discusses ideology as the direct, declarative influence of political regimes on art criticism (as well as the artistic practice and academic philosophy). Secondly, ideology is examined as the force that shapes the internal semantics of art criticism, as well as the dynamics of the relationships between the art system, art practices, and philosophy.

The book draws on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept of the ideological structure of cultural (and academic) *habitus*. Bourdieu argued that what we perceive as the internal and natural development of networks of ideas from philosophers, writers, musicians, artists, etc., comes from the specific codes interacting within an already formed, ideologically conditioned field of values. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* defines the unconscious predispositions according to which agents operate within this field. Additionally, when discussing the system of contemporary art institutions, this book uses Louis Althusser's concept of cultural and art institutions as *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISA), which ideologically interpellate individuals without them being aware of it – permeating them at an unconscious level, and even constructing them as subjects, giving them consciousness and agency. Finally, the book employs Terry Eagleton's concept of ideology – which is even less political in the traditional sense – in order to identify the formation of the meanings, signs, and values of social life.

In synthesising these diverse approaches to critically examine ideology and its institutions, the book offers an inevitably biased perspective that draws upon leftist and neo-Marxist frameworks.

One of the reviewers of this book noted that the book's direct links to neo-Marxism could be questioned. Two reasons may lie behind this impression. The first of these is due to the specific nature of the transformations in Lithuanian art institutions and art criticism discourse after 1990. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of Lithuanian independence, local processes of liberation, sociocultural upheaval, and transformation, including artistic (neo)avant-gardism, were characterized by a paradoxical, even highlighted anti-leftist gravitation. The Lithuanian sociologist and

philosopher Zenonas Norkus proposed to call the political, economic, and sociocultural transformations in Lithuania in 1988–2004 (before joining the EU and NATO) a 'modern restoration' rather than a 'revolution' because historically 'revolution' is associated with left-wing ideology, while 'modern restoration' is considered a neoconservative reaction with revolutionary elements and is therefore progressive and innovative in a certain sense.

The anti-leftist stance can be explained as a natural reaction of Lithuanian artists and scholars in the humanities in general to the Soviet occupation as well as the official Soviet ideology, which they identify with left-wing ideology and (Russian) 'communism.' Such a reaction is a form of post-traumatic stress disorder; therefore, Lithuanian artists, art critics, and theoreticians alike, often believe that left-wing ideology in Lithuania has been completely, hopelessly and irrevocably discredited.

The second reason, which is closely related to the first, is that over the three decades of independence, no stronger and more coherent left-wing position and the corresponding discourse has materialized in the Lithuanian contemporary art system and art criticism, or in Lithuanian sociology and philosophy in general. What is more or less openly positioned as 'left-wing' is sometimes simply an odd mutation of neoconservatism. However, more often, it coincides with liberal and neoliberal positions.

In this book, on the one hand, I reveal the diffusion of ideological and sociocultural convergence, but I do not identify with it. On the other hand, as a partial insider of the system, who is to a certain degree influenced by all these local professional environments and the theoretical and artistic tradition, I feel compelled to look at neo-Marxism from a certain (critical) distance. I have already mentioned my fragmented professional identity as an artist, art critic, sociologist, and philosopher (moreover, I am a representative of the so-called social 'transclass' – I came from a proletarian family and finally found myself in a milieu of artists and humanitarians, but still, I would not say that I have seamlessly blended into their milieu). Therefore, by pointing to certain theoretical ideological edges and identifying the ideological and sociocultural change in the Lithuanian contemporary art

system and its component – art criticism – I critically evaluate myself, as if I was studying myself in a mirror.

I acknowledge that this perspective introduces a degree of subjectivity, as certain statements may carry a more pronounced ideological charge than others. I also fully recognise the occasionally declarative and polemical tone of the book.

It is crucial to note that this analysis is inherently shaped by a specific socio-ideological perspective. I embrace the fact that my understanding of these issues is deeply influenced by my own historical and geopolitical background. As an Eastern European scholar, and specifically a Lithuanian one, my worldview and mentality are inevitably informed by the unique experiences and challenges faced by this region. This includes the legacy of the Soviet rule, the transition to independence, and the ongoing process of navigating the complexities of the globalised world.

Structure

The structure of this book mirrors the aforementioned ambivalent polyphony of its methodologies. It is more rhizomatic than linear, diverging from the traditional unidirectional approach typically found in academic texts. Chapters are linked through associative connections, allowing for a non-chronological reading experience. Each chapter explores a distinct facet of art criticism – semantic, sociocultural, and quasi-ideological – and examines its intricate relationship with art practices and philosophy.

Nevertheless, the chapters are not haphazard or disconnected. A clear thread runs throughout. Beginning with broad explorations of the relationships between art practices, art criticism, and the ideological predispositions in philosophy, the focus gradually shifts to more specific, geographically and professionally localised issues.

Broader questions concerning the relationship between ideology and aesthetics, Western avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, and the systems and terminology of contemporary art institutions are analysed in detail to better understand the concepts that have been adopted in (Central and) Eastern

Europe (particularly in Lithuania since 1990). This is because the imitation and adaptation of certain concepts and phenomena in different geopolitical and sociocultural situations can create subtle gaps in meaning and functionality that are worth examining and analysing. Therefore, the book devotes considerable attention to broader, global issues.

The first chapter, "Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries: The Leftist Ideology and Aesthetics", delves into the specific nuances of how aesthetics intersect with Marxist and neo-Marxist thought. It focuses on general theoretical questions regarding aesthetics and leftist ideology, including the intersection of these two domains, paying significant attention to the juxtaposition of philosophical materialism with the tradition of Platonic idealism. These aspects are crucial because, during the late Soviet period, the re-emerged discipline of Lithuanian art criticism[1] was indoctrinated with the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism. After Lithuania regained independence, the identity of art criticism (and the art system, philosophy) was constructed exclusively and declaratively through an anti-Soviet (anti-Leninist, even anti-Marxist) position. While understandable and justifiable from the perspective of liberation from the oppressive ideology, the new identitarian stance contained inherent contradictions.

The chapter begins with an analysis of Karl Marx's aesthetic idealism, which, paradoxically, emerges from his paradigm of dialectical materialism. The chapter then introduces revolutionary avant-garde as a form of Marxism put into practice and applied to aesthetics, and provides an overview of its key principles. It also examines aspects of post-Marxist aesthetic theory, explores the dialectics in literary and art criticism, and discusses the genre of 'factual literature' as a distinctly ideological approach to aesthetics.

[1] It existed in independent Lithuania of the interwar period (1918–1940), but, with the occupation of Lithuania by Nazi Germany (1941–1944) and then by the Soviet Union from 1944 onwards, the development of art criticism was interrupted. It was only in the early 1980s that art criticism reappeared in the Soviet (official) cultural press.

The Russian radical left literary movement LAF (Leftist Artists Front), which promoted factual literature (a blend of literature, journalism, and cultural criticism) as a radical 'return to reality', is certainly seen as utopian today. However, it is presented in this book because it serves as a unique concentrate of Marxist aesthetics, by providing a point of comparison for the ideological and aesthetic aspirations of the later 20th-century neo-avant-garde.

Secondly, this movement made significant contributions to literary criticism, due to offering a qualitatively new understanding of *factology* and its relation to reality, as well as a relatively new set of critical tools. The latter, incidentally, proved to be important for art criticism in the second half of the 20th century. The contradiction between 'realism' and 'reality' in art criticism became prominent as part of the neo-avant-garde phenomenon. It also emerged within the framework of debates about the crisis of art criticism. Notably, the polemic between 'analytical' and 'belletristic' schools of art criticism in the 1980s in the United States became relevant for Lithuanian art criticism in the 1990s.[2]

Furthermore, the sociocultural identity of art criticism in independent Lithuania (post-1990), particularly in the context of contemporary art institutions and practices, was largely constructed on the foundation of neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily in the US and Western Europe. However, it's crucial to note that the quasi-radical aspirations of neo-avant-garde were often overlooked. In an attempt to better understand the conceptual and ideological aspirations of Lithuanian art criticism (and Lithuanian contemporary art institutions), the second chapter, titled "Late 20th Century: Neo-Avant-Garde and the Concept of the "End of Art", expands on the themes of Western concepts of neo-avant-gardism, counterculture, and postmodernism. This chapter also explores Arthur Danto's notion of the 'end of art (history)', addressing the resulting crisis in art criticism during this period. Upon emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, this concept haunts not

[2] This issue also received some attention during the Soviet period, but the debate was heavily dogmatised, and thus inevitably biased and distorted.

only the predominantly Anglophone aesthetic discourse but also the broader contemporary art world in the West.

Since Lithuanian art criticism and visual arts (both during the Soviet times and after the restoration of independence) are laden with references to (neo)conservatism, the third chapter, titled "The Late 20th Century Conservatism", reviews the key postulates of political and philosophical conservatism of the late 20th century. This chapter surveys the key features of contemporary ideological conservatism and revisits the problem of aesthetic idealism within the Marxian paradigm. It also discusses the conservative principle of 'reform to preserve' and its problematic relation to aesthetics.

The fourth chapter, "Art Criticism and Philosophy", while retaining the quasi-ideological direction, focuses on the specific relation between art criticism and philosophy. This chapter further examines the dialectic between leftist and conservative aesthetics by exploring how ideology manifests in professional language. The chapter discusses the hierarchical tensions between philosophy and art criticism, elaborating on how artworks are conceptualised in each field and how philosophers aim to discuss works of contemporary art, producing their own version of art criticism (which is distinct from aesthetics or philosophy of art). This analysis attempts to view texts written by philosophers for various occasions (such as gallery openings or exhibition catalogues). While closely related to art criticism or art history, to a practicing art critic, these works appear as belonging to a peculiar subgenre that calls for discussion. The aim is absolutely not to criticise philosophers in their capacity to philosophise, but rather to construct a theoretical-hypothetical model that would allow for a specific perspective on a particular *subgenre of texts*.

The fifth chapter, "The Cold War and the Decadent Western Modernity: The Soviet Perspective", shifts the focus towards Lithuanian art criticism of the Soviet period. The chapter begins with an overview of the broader questions of Soviet ideology and aesthetics, starting with Marxist-Leninist conservatism during the late Soviet period. It also discusses the informal Soviet (or 'optimistic') Marxism and its relationship to Western ('pessimistic')

Marxism. The chapter demonstrates how certain terms, such as 'modernism', were used and reinterpreted in Soviet Lithuanian art criticism and art history. The final two subsections of Chapter 5 delve specifically into the question of the (dys)functionality of Lithuanian art criticism during the Soviet period.

Following the Soviet occupation of 1940, art criticism virtually disappeared from Lithuanian discourse, only to get restored (albeit distorted and reshaped) during the 1970s under Brezhnev. Analysing this period's institutional and ideological frameworks helps us trace the evolution of Lithuanian art criticism and its entanglement with ideology. This historical excursion is essential for understanding the transformations in Lithuanian critical discourse and the inertia that persisted after the restoration of independence in 1990.

The final two chapters – the sixth and the seventh – focus specifically on the socio-ideological genesis of Lithuanian art criticism post-1990. The periodisation chosen for Lithuanian art criticism (and its genesis) during the period of independence – 1990–2009, and from 2009 until today – is somewhat arbitrary and yet symbolic.

However, I selected these boundaries primarily based on my personal experience as an art critic, observing from within the discourse certain shifts in art criticism since approximately 2009–2010. Additionally, 2009 is significant due to the establishment of two major institutions: the state-run National Art Gallery, and a privately owned Modern Art Centre [Modernaus meno centras] (although the latter was opened only in 2018). Therefore, this year (i.e., 2009) as if marks a shift in the power dynamics and semantic structures within the contemporary art institution system, and consequently, within art criticism.

Furthermore, the period around 2009–2010 is generally considered a marker of the end of the post-Soviet era in Lithuania and the beginning of a 'full-fledged' capitalist period. Ultimately, 2009–2010 is significant as it marks the beginning of a global conservative turn following the global financial crisis of 2008, a development that is particularly relevant to the themes discussed in this book.

The sixth chapter, "Hermeneutic Ripples: Lithuanian Art Criticism after 1990", examines Lithuanian art criticism in the post-independence era. By using the metaphor of ripples moving across water, the chapter illustrates how ideas like the 'end of art' (Danto) and the 'end of history' (Fukuyama) eventually reached the former Eastern Bloc. These concepts sparked a fierce polemic within Lithuanian art criticism between 'modernists' and 'postmodernists'.

By examining the shifts that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the study uncovers the new cultural and socio-aesthetic myths that have emerged in the post-independence era. To achieve this, the chapter explores how Lithuanian art criticism grappled with ideology during the Soviet period and how it *uncritically* accepted the framework of liberal-capitalist thought that followed.

The final chapter, "Lithuanian Art Criticism After 2009: The 'New-Old' Ideological Order", investigates how Lithuanian art criticism became dominated by the rhetoric of institutional 'normalisation'. The chapter explores how this normalisation – essentially a neoconservative turn – has influenced the identity of Lithuanian art criticism.

Last but not least, as far as the broader geopolitical identities are concerned, by critically examining the new cultural myths and ideological underpinnings that have shaped Lithuanian art criticism since the restoration of independence, these chapters offer a deeper understanding of the ideological dynamic in the Baltic (and even Eastern European) region as a whole.

K. Š.