

Foreword

‘Contemporary art’ is usually perceived as art whose main function is to criticize reality. Since existing morals and societal beliefs prevent us from seeing the true imperfection of the world, such art tries to remove the veil of ideology from reality. The prevailing opinion is that ideology and ‘critical art’ are incompatible. Furthermore, they are opposites of each other: ideology tries to mask the contradictions of reality, whereas ‘critical art’ exposes those contradictions and ideology itself.

However, in exposing the illusion of everyday life’s normality, the representatives of ‘critical art’ usually do not elaborate on their own critical viewpoint, nor do they reflect on their own plastic language and place in the broader cultural and political sphere. This, as Kęstutis Šapoka notes in his book, is what makes ‘contemporary art’ not only a hostage of ideology but its direct producer.

Art affirms the power of the dominant ideology not only through individual works but also primarily through the system of social institutions, such as galleries and art criticism. The viewer who perceives/consumes ‘contemporary art’ is in contact with a pre-standardized notion of modernity, the given.

How can one bring back to art the qualities of authentic critique, ‘the given’ (and the certain conflict with one’s own epoch)? What could be the relation between the universal and the exceptional, the public and the subjective of such conflict – a gap between art and the dominant ideology?

These questions, Šapoka argues, are particularly relevant in Lithuania, which for the last century has been the object of colonial universalization – first Soviet, and then European. The author positions the Lithuanian art system in the broad context of aesthetic theory, focusing on the early twentieth-century avant-garde. The representatives of avant-garde sought to get away from ideological functions by demystifying the concept of the work of art in general, while at the same time highlighting materialistic, factual foundations of (the work) art. Montage, as a principle of disrupting the totality

of the work and setting its parts loose, was perceived by avant-garde not as a principle that reflects reality, but as a principle that literally transforms it.

Even though the ambitions of the avant-garde have not been realized, the forms created by it have crossed to what we call today 'contemporary art'. The negation of the totality of the work of art was also inherited from avant-garde, but no longer for the sake of revolutionary change – rather for an actual reconciliation with reality. Today, in its critique of ideology, art must address not its formal dimension, but the system of social institutions that determines the perception of each individual work of art. Based on this premise, Šapoka concludes his book by looking at the ideological transformations of the last three decades in the Lithuanian art system.

Šapoka's book, a striking and original study, is a new manifesto of institutional critique, built on a great number of theoretical debates in European sociology on the concept of ideology.

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