

# LITHUANIA: THE BALTIC COUNTRY KEEPS ITS PROMISES

MARTA SILVI [critica d'arte e curatrice]

Augustas Serapinas, Gym, 2017. Courtesy Emalin, Londra. Photo credits Andrej Vasilenko

It gained independence from the former Soviet Union early, back in 1990. It pushed down on the accelerator towards contemporaneity, taking advantage of the strengths and weaknesses of other Western countries. Thirty years later, the results are clearly visible in the visual arts, architecture, theatre and in the cultural awareness of Lithuanians in general.

Lithuania is among the most dynamic European states. The largest of the Baltic countries (covering roughly a quarter of Italy's surface-area), it has a short coastline on the Baltic Sea. It is a very young parliamentary Republic, the first to proclaim its independence from the Soviet Union on 11 March 1990. Historically disputed between Germany and Russia, this country has always been influenced by numerous countries and cultures, thus slowing the formation of its national artistic identity. While this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of independence, for some years, Lithuania has taken every opportunity to become better known in Italy and other countries through its rich and particularly far-sighted cultural programme. We need only mention the **Golden Lion** received at the 58th Venice Biennale of Art.

## GREAT MASTERS AND MID-CAREER ARTISTS

Lithuania has produced extraordinary artists such as **Jonas Mekas**, a reference figure of New American Cinema, founder of *Film Culture* magazine and the Film-makers' Cooperative, which would later evolve into the prestigious Anthology Film Archive; and **George Maciunas**, architect, writer, composer and performer, as well as one of the founders and main forces behind Fluxus.

The next generation seems to be fundamentally concerned with recent historical memory, which highlights the critical relationship of contemporary art with social, political, and cultural phenomena linked to post-Soviet (artistic) identity. The main themes of **Deimantas Narkevičius's** works, for example, are the memory of the utopia of modernism, history, and social memory, which create a dichotomy between memory and oblivion.

The artistic activity of **Nomeda** and **Gediminas Urbonas**, a couple in life and in art, also starts from archival research and then expands into issues of collaborative participation, raising questions about the community and economic and environmental awareness. In 2018, Studio Urbonas curated the *Swamp Pavilion* for Lithuania's first national participation in the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

## THE NEXT GENERATION

A new generation of artists is emerging with strength and determination. The topics they investigate focus on contemporary ideological, economic, and cultural conditions, through research of a historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological nature, combined with interdisciplinary and scenographic artistic skills.







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#56	LITHUANIA CALLS ITALY	BENEDETTA CARPI DE RESMINI	CRISTINA COBIANCHI		TERESA MACRÌ	MANUELA PACELLA	ALESSANDRA TRONCONE	#56
<div>SEPTEMBER ♦ OCTOBER 2020</div> <div>STORIES • LITUANIA ♦</div>	<p>For several years, the Lithuanian Culture Institute has embarked on an energetic study-travel programme that has invited numerous international professionals to discover the richness of the country’s contemporary visual culture. We, therefore, asked some of the people from Italy who have first-hand experience of Lithuanian culture, for a reflection on its art scene and an indication of the names we should be looking out for.</p> 	<p>My encounter with Lithuania was initially filtered by a novel that I loved very much, <i>Baltic Souls</i> by Jan Brokken, and later by the writer Roman Gary, a naturalized French Lithuanian Jew. What sets the latest generations apart is their precise deconstruction of historical rhetoric in search of a language that does not conform to the ideological forces or the homologating power of the mass media. In particular, I would say that female artists are continuing to develop interesting themes. One such is <b>Lina Lapelytė</b>, one of the artists I worked with several years ago. I also follow the work of <b>Kristina Inčiūraitė</b> with interest: it always evokes new elements that are not only related to issues of identity or violence against women. Finally, I would like to mention <b>Mykolas Juodelė</b>, a very young photographer who did a residency in Rome for the Magic Carpets platform, and who I am sure will have an important career as a photojournalist.</p> 	<p>Lithuania is a young country that plans investment through culture and art, including contemporary art. The museum directors, the theatre public and that of exhibitions as well as those managing independent spaces like ours, are all young. Those of my generation, who in our old and dormant Western Europe still shamelessly occupy all the positions that count, have almost disappeared. The community is made up of structured, well-trained, passionate, receptive, and curious artists. The younger artists seldom speak directly of their own recent past in their works, but some show delicate, indelible traces of it, which often turn into something dreamlike or fundamental archetypes, ours as well, of the “short century”.</p> 		<p>The trip to Vilnius and Kaunas fully confirmed my expectations of this Baltic country: it is very orderly, but also has great potential from a creative point of view. Moreover, if you consider that this territory gave birth to three great cultural figures - <b>George Maciunas</b>, <b>Jonas Mekas</b> and <b>Emmanuel Lévin</b>a - you become aware that beneath this subdued order is a fervour that frequently explodes, producing fantastic figures. The political memory of the vicissitudes, conflicts, continuous occupations and then the independence in 1990 from the former Soviet Union, still influences the Lithuanian artists’ reflections and the historical reconnaissance that fuels the passionate cultural debate. In recent years, I have noticed that the Lithuanian government provides a great deal of support to the world of art: the merit of the success of the Lithuanian pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale of Art can also be attributed to the interactions they have managed to weave over the years.</p> 	<p>The impression I received during my trip to Lithuania was of great vitality and a strong organization and desire to spread knowledge of Lithuanian contemporary art abroad. Among the positive consequences of this enormous energy and economic investment are certainly the numerous international awards that Lithuania has earned in recent years. It is absolutely no coincidence, in fact, that the names of certain very gifted artists have emerged on occasions such as the 2019 Venice Biennale. Among the artists I found most interesting, I would certainly cite <b>Lina Lapelytė</b> and <b>Gintarė Minelgaitė</b> (<i>GoraParasit</i>).</p> 	<p>Compared to other countries of the former Soviet bloc, Lithuania is perhaps the one that most clearly speaks a truly European language. The signs of its recent history are clearly visible, and this endows an indisputable charm; at the same time, we perceive a push towards the future that the new generations are pursuing with great responsibility and seriousness. Although there are galleries that operate at an international level and despite the growing international role of the Art Vilnius fair, I believe that the commercial circuit is still rather limited, partly due to the Soviet heritage and partly to the absence of widespread collecting. Mainly, artists work thanks to government grants from the Lithuanian Council of Culture and this perhaps facilitates a more experimental attitude, particularly regarding fluid languages such as performance and video.</p>	<div>SEPTEMBER ♦ OCTOBER 2020</div> <div>STORIES • LITUANIA ♦</div>
<div>6</div>	<p>restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, finally generated private demand. The influx of new materials and the late arrival of echoes of postmodernism created a unique situation in which architects had the opportunity to interpret, create and study with courage”. The names of those she indicates as being of “very high quality, variety of style and intentions” are <b>Audrius Ambrašas</b>, <b>Rolandas Palekas</b> and <b>Gintautas Natkevičius</b>, while among the younger architects she cites <b>Do architects</b>, <b>Aketuri</b>, <b>SA atelier</b>, <b>Office de Architectura o Isora x Lozuraityte studio</b>, <b>Processoffice</b>, <b>IMPLMNT</b> and <b>PU-PA</b>. “In 2016 Lithuania participated in the Venice Biennale of Architecture”, continues Reklaitė, “where it inaugurated a large exhibition together with Latvia and Estonia, the Baltic Pavilion; in 2018, under the guidance of the curator-artists Nomedas and Gediminas Urbonas, it tackled a broader idea, a swamp that has no physical or national borders. At the 17th Biennale, Lithuania will be exhibiting an even more original idea: the Lithuanian Space Agency will present <i>A Planet of People</i>, a project by Julijonas Urbonas”.</p> <p><b>Pippo Ciorra</b>, senior curator for architecture at MAXXI in Rome, tells us</p>	<p>about <i>The Swamp School</i>, the Lithuanian pavilion for the 16th Biennale of Architecture, which he commissioned. “<i>The Swamp School</i> was conceived from a small, synthetic utopia. The idea was to combine the already widely recognized vitality of the Lithuanian art scene with the nascent, but not yet internationally known, vitality of the new generation of Lithuanian architects. The Urbonas team of artists and curators of the pavilion had the two-fold merit of having already won an award at the Biennale of Art and of being very interested in spatial and environmental issues. As for the architects, given that it was basically a Biennale of architecture and that in Lithuania (fortunately) there are still no local, “star” architects, we chose to seek a collective commitment from a group of about fifteen emerging architects.</p> <p>The intent was partially successful. The curators were able to use an “espace trouvé” to give shape to their spatial idea of ecological and urban commitment. The architects - myself included - did not manage to produce what we had hoped would be the real “coup de théâtre” of the first independent Lithuanian participation in the Biennale of Architecture, namely the construction of a new, temporary pavilion</p>	<p>on a small ‘buildable’ body of water at the corner of the <i>Fondamenta dei Giardini</i>. The defeat suffered (due to Venetian bureaucracy and the available budget) was partially offset by the excellent success achieved. A publication is being prepared that describes the whole project and the overall experience”. What would you say about the comparison between Italy and Lithuania? “<i>The architectural community in Lithuania is small, modernist, optimistic and agile; it is certainly not rich, but it occupies a recognized and usable space in society</i>”, Ciorra replies. On the other hand, “<i>the Italian community is huge, impoverished, unable to take risks and blackmailed by bureaucracy; like almost everything in our country, it is always subject to the reason of State</i>”.</p> <p><b>THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD IN MUSEUMS</b></p> <p>The spaces dedicated to the contemporary period, often built in the early years of independence under the impetus of the initial enthusiasm, are now numerous, especially in Vilnius and Kaunas. The Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), that opened in 1992, became the first contemporary art institution in the country to be financed</p>		<p>by the state. Directed from its earliest days by <b>Kęstutis Kuizinas</b>, it has distinguished itself for providing new visions and strategies in art, offering unprecedented concepts for the local art audience. A year later the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA), was founded. Financed by <b>George Soros</b>, it has greatly influenced the development of the Lithuanian art scene by supporting and disseminating contemporary art projects internationally. In 2000, the Soros Centre was reorganized as the Contemporary Art Information Centre (CAIC), under the Lithuanian Art Museum and later became part of the National Gallery of Art, which opened in 2009 in the former Museum of the Revolution. The National Gallery is a multifunctional cultural centre that houses Lithuanian works of art from the 20th and 21st centuries, while temporary exhibitions usually combine Lithuanian art with international art. The brand-new MO Museum, which started its activity in 2010 as the Modern Art Centre, supported by collectors <b>Danguolė</b> and <b>Viktoras Butkus</b>, is the most ambitious private initiative of the last twenty years. It houses an art collection that covers the period from the 1960s to the present day, within an avant-garde, intimate and iconic</p>	<p>Vilnius and Kaunas now have many spaces dedicated to contemporary art that were often created in the early years of independence.</p> <p>structure, designed by <b>Daniel Libeskind</b>, created in collaboration with the Lithuanian studio <b>Do Architects</b> and inaugurated in October 2018.</p> <p><b>ASSOCIATIONS AND ACAD EMIES</b></p> <p>The Lithuanian Artists’ Association “<i>is the successor of the Lithuanian Artists’ Association founded in 1935, which continues its creative and public activity, and actively defends and implements its cherished values in the independent Republic of Lithuania</i>”, its statute reads. Founded in 1989, it has territorial divisions in Kaunas, Šiauliai, Panevėžys and Klaipėda and manages four galleries in Vilnius.</p> <p>Founded in 1568, the University of</p>	<p>Vilnius is considered the oldest university in Eastern Europe. For a long time, it was the only higher education school in Lithuania, and it has safeguarded cultural and scientific tradition, playing a significant role in the cultural life not only of Lithuania but also of neighbouring countries.</p> <p>The Vilnius Academy of Arts is a state university with a tradition that dates back to 1793 when the Department of Architecture was established at the University of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It offers programmes in different study areas (art, design, architecture, and theory and history of art). It has four campuses in the cities of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda and Telšiai. It manages a museum, several galleries and exhibition spaces, including Titanikas (Titanic), which opened in 2009, as well as the renowned Nida Art Colony, opened on the Baltic coast in 2011. Together with Rupert, an artistic centre and residence built on the Neris River in Vilnius in 2013 in a building designed by the award-winning Lithuanian architect <b>Audrius Ambrašas</b>, and the Kaunas Artists’ House, inaugurated in 2018, these facilities are the flagship of the Academy’s programme in Lithuania of international residencies for artists, curators and writers.</p>	<div>7</div>



ARTIST AND AMBASSADOR:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH SILVIA GIAMBRONE

We discuss Lithuania with the Italian artist **Silvia Giambrone**, winner of the ninth Kaunas Biennial in 2013 with *Teatro Anatomico* and, in 2016, appointed ambassador for Kaunas 2022. What was your impression the first time you visited Lithuania? My first experience of Lithuania was very significant, not only because its history intersects with the most crucial moments in European history, but also because I was deeply touched by the palpable need of the people I worked with to write their present time and future through the languages of art and culture, to free themselves from a complex past and transform it into a conscious present. The thirst for culture that I found in Lithuania is something that has long since faded in Italy.

**From a personal and identity point of view, did *Teatro anatomico* touch issues to which the Lithuanian community is sensitive?**

*Teatro anatomico* belongs to a series of works on embroidery and is a performance influenced by my Sicilian origins. I have an embroidered collar sewn onto my skin to bring out the performative relationship between certain so-called feminine activities and the politics of identity. In Lithuania, the embroidered collar possessed another story: during the Soviet occupation it was compulsory to wear one at school, so much so, that one of the first gestures of protest was to tear it off both literally and symbolically. Therefore, *Teatro anatomico* represented a moment of truth for them too, a truth that can still not be spoken. This experience showed me the ambiguous nature of the truth of images. Jacques Lacan argued that

telling the truth is impossible, it is the words that are missing. The Lithuanian artistic experience, on the other hand, made me think that truth exists, but it is ubiquitous.

**What art system did you find in Lithuania?**

A predominantly public system, with some associations and a huge desire for renewal from the students in the Academies of Fine Arts. The bureaucratic cage of the Soviet machine is still apparent and there is much effort underway to streamline it and make it more dynamic. Museums, especially in Kaunas, still suffered from being unsuitable as containers of contemporary art. I think there is a lot to learn from countries like Lithuania that have not yet tamed culture as entertainment or a bearer of status, as is increasingly the case with us.

**Could you give us an anticipation of Kaunas 2022 European Capital of Culture?**

Starting from its history, Kaunas is working on rethinking what it means to be a contemporary city, what are the real definitions of “contemporary” and how should these be structured. The performative aspect and the involvement of citizens will be central because, for Kaunas, art has an important mission of redefining identity but without losing the specific peculiarities of art, of its poetic and aesthetic tools. What is central to the mission of Kaunas2022 is the urgent question that concerns all European cities at a time when the constituent values are in crisis, namely: what does it mean to be a European capital?

ArtVilnius is the only  
contemporary art fair  
in Lithuania and the  
largest visual arts event  
in Eastern Europe.

exhibition spaces and organizes workshops, performances and residencies for a wide variety of disciplines.

The Lithuanian Photographers’ Association promotes Lithuanian photography and protects the copyrights of its members; it organizes exhibitions in Lithuania and abroad, as well as seminars (since 1973 an international seminar in Nida), conferences, meetings, debates and publications. The association and its departments manage four galleries in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda.

Autarkia is a visionary place and, as its statement says, “an artists’ day-care centre, a club of interests, an office space for putative experiences and imaginary solutions, a bistro for experimental gastronomy, a gallery and a project incubator”. Editorial, founded in 2017 by **Neringa Černiauskaitė** and **Vitalija Jasaitė**, respectively editor-in-chief of the magazines *Artnews*. It and *Echo Gone Wrong*, is a project space that hosts the editorial offices themselves.

It focuses on emerging Lithuanian and international artists, inviting them to exhibit their visions in a non-institutional and non-commercial context; it also organizes a series of talks and performances and events. Lastly, *Lokomotif* is a very special space for contemporary art exhibitions, workshops, residencies, and concerts. Opened in spring 2019 on the second floor of the Lentvaris railway station building, in the apartment built in 1862 as the residence of the Tsar, it is located fifteen minutes by train from the centre of Vilnius.

THE PRIVATE GALLERIES

The transition from a planned economy to a free-market economy has also encouraged the creation of several private galleries: firstly, *Vartai*. Opened in the early years of independence, it represents emerging and established artists, among others, **Žilvinas Kempinas** and **Aidas Bareikis**.

Among the youngest and most enterprising galleries, (AV17), founded in 2011, is one of the few Lithuanian galleries that exclusively exhibits contemporary art objects, sculptures and installations. *Contour Art Gallery* is, instead, a travelling gallery that aims to enhance its artists’ production by finding the most suitable locations for each work, creating new contexts for their ideas and different perspectives and approaches to the works of art.

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE GOLDEN LION:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CATERINA AVATANEO



Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė e Lina Lapelytė, *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, Biennale Arti Visive, Venezia 2019. Photo Andrej Vasilenko © Courtesy the artists

Associate curator at *Arcade* and *DEMO Moving Image Festival*, assistant curator at *Serpentine Galleries* in London, as well as assistant curator at the 2019 Lithuania Pavilion curated by Lucia Pietroiusti, **Caterina Avataneo** tells us what you still don’t know about the Lithuanian performance that won the last Venice Biennale.

**How did you become involved with the Lithuanian art scene?**

I first visited Lithuania, and specifically Kaunas, at the *Creature Performance Art Festival* in 2015. Since then my interest in the Lithuanian art scene has remained very much alive. In 2018, I was lucky enough to be involved in the production of a Jonas Mekas screening and Q&A at the *Peckhamplex Cinema* in London. The event was organized by *Serpentine Galleries* and the Lithuanian Cultural Institute, and that was when Lucia Pietroiusti and I met.

**What steps led to the pavilion’s success?**

The Lithuania Pavilion was located in a *Marina Militare* warehouse, a few minutes from the *Arsenale*. The choice of space was fundamental when creating *Sun & Sea (Marina)* because the performance developed on an artificial beach that was populated for eight hours a day by singers and extras (including dogs) and observed from a minstrels’ gallery above. The singing team included many local voices, and even the vinyl record and catalogue was a project designed by *Ābāke*, and produced and printed by *Grafiche Veneziane* and *MaleFatte - Rio Terà dei Pensieri*, a cooperative that works with inmates of the *Santa Maria Maggiore* prison.

**How would you explain the interest of a large part of the young generation of Lithuanian artists (and not just them) in performative language?**

For purely interpretative purposes, I would refer to *Rosalind Krauss*, who was already speaking of *Post-Medium Condition* in the late nineties, not only referring to Lithuanian artists but to the growth of artistic practices that were, in general, abandoning interest in the purity of the medium to focus on different ways of articulating the complexities of today’s world. Art and aesthetics are increasingly demonstrating an interest in interdisciplinary contributions and the use of performance facilitates this crossover. More recently, *Dorothea von Hantelmann*, speaking of performative language rather than performance, has observed that today’s audience is more inclined to attribute meaning to the experience that a work produces than to the work itself. It is, therefore, interesting to observe how artists are negotiating their involvement with the capitalist system in a conscious way. *Robertas Narkus*’s work fits perfectly here, but also that of *Augustas Serapinas*, *Anastasia Sosunova* and others.

*Meno Niša Gallery* is one of the main contemporary art galleries in Lithuania, based in the historic centre of Vilnius. The director, **Diana Stomienė**, is president of the Lithuanian Art Galleries association and has been the director of *ArtVilnius* since 2009. The gallery represents both established artists and promising young newcomers, with particular attention paid to the promotion of new media, installations and performances. The *Rooster Gallery* focuses on young Lithuanian artists. By adopting new schemes, such as the rental of works of art, it is not bound to a permanent location but exhibits the works of each artist in a different space each time.

FAIRS AND BIENNIALS

*ArtVilnius* is the only contemporary art fair in Lithuania and the largest visual arts event in Eastern Europe. Inaugurated in 2009, it was one of the flagship products of Vilnius European Capital of Culture. Over the past decade, the fair has expanded and is carving out a place on the international art scene. Every year *ArtVilnius* welcomes about 23,000 visitors, with about sixty galleries from different countries. This year it was postponed due to Covid.

Kaunas, the second-largest city in Lithuania by population, was the provisional capital during the Polish invasion between 1920 and 1940, a time of considerable industrial and urban development. Its history has been scarred by several events: invaded first by Soviet troops in 1940, then by the Germans in 1941, it witnessed the massacre of its entire Jewish population (about 40,000 people) at *Fort IX*, as well as thousands of Jews deported from Germany and Austria. The city’s long tradition in textile manufacturing led to the inauguration, in 1997, of the *Textile Biennial*. In 2013, the Biennial expanded its horizons to include visual arts, video, performance, contemporary dance and sound art and changed its name to the *Kaunas Biennial*. In 2015, **Nicolas Bourriaud** curated the main exhibition while the 2019 edition was entrusted to a team of international curators, including the Italian **Alessandra Troncone**. Kaunas was also chosen as the 2022 European Capital of Culture. The *Baltic Triennial*, on the other hand, is one of the main contemporary art events in Northern Europe. Founded in 1979 when the country was still occupied by the Soviet Union, after the restoration of independence in 1990, the CAC became both organizer and host, while the international aspect of the *Triennale* gradually expanded. The 13th edition, in 2017, was directed by the French curator **Vincent Honoré** while the next one, scheduled for 2021, will be curated by **Valentinas Kliškauskas** and **João Laia**, pandemic permitting.