

SOROS CENTERS FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS NETWORK COORDINATOR

Sirje HELME

I would like to introduce very briefly the aim and activity of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts as one of the priorities of these centers is the documentation of the contemporary art in these countries where the centers are locating. Since this year 16 centers worked in the Central and East European countries as well as in previous Soviet Union and Baltic countries. This year three new centers were opened in Sarajevo, in Moldova and in Odessa, Ukraine. The Soros Centers for Contemporary Art network is a part of the Soros Foundations, launched by the international philanthropist and financier George Soros and these foundations are active more than in twenty countries, in post-socialist countries as well as in South-Africa, helping to build up the infrastructure and institutions of an open society through the support of a variety of education, cultural and economic restructuring activities.

The art centers are quite independent institutions inside this huge organization and they are specialized only to the contemporary visual art (if I can still use this term, long ago lost its original meaning). Most of these centers were established three-four years ago and they had similar programmes in the very beginning - grant program, annual exhibition and documentation. By now the situation is changed, these 18 countries are quite different and that is why local boards are working out their own priorities, but still three main programs are as the basis for our activity. All these programs were worked out according to our aims - firstly to help to overcome the critical situation, when the old system was collapsed and the new and poor state have not been established yet new structures to support the culture. And the second aim, which actually is coming more and more important is to create the access to international art world, to create the communication with every kind of art organizations, institutions, etc, to be in mutual process and to promote also local artists and art events.

I will concentrate to the documentation program, although there is a great role in working out our centers' specific features in the grant program and annual exhibition too. The priorities for the both of the programmes are to deal with the art, basing in the new technology, multimedia, interactive art, video art, etc.

The documentation program is working in the different levels - the first aim is of course to collect every kind of local art information, making video recordings and slides from the exhibitions, to select the information and to make it available for the public, to the local as well the international.

Second level is creating special artists file, using special computerised program. This program was worked out for using in every our centers and also using it like common program in network, but there are still some technical problems.

Third level is to work on the comprehensive documentation on the individual artists, it means long work, art critics and historians help, collecting as much as possible materials about one artist. I can also say, that this program is ambitious for us, because it is beyond our regular activity as information centers. But the reason is in our history, I have again to come back to the history of our countries, to the years when very many of the art movements, problems were not allowed to be documented officially, many artworks were never collected to the museums only by the ideological reasons and this means, that our centers have taken the ambitions to help the researches, art historians in the future and of course, this work has to be done in the close connection with universities, academies, etc. But I can give an excellent example, how valuable can be the result of this work - my colleagues from Moscow are owning may be the most complete archive about the dissident art in previous Soviet Union in fifties, sixties and seventies. Of course, this comprehensive documentation is not only about the artists of past, most of the documentation is made about today's artists and these documentations are very much in use.

SCCA centers have also small libraries, consisting from videotapes, slides, CD-Rom as well as from the books and art magazines of course.

The whole policy of our centers is in most cases to be more and more the information centers. In this year program one of the aims was to create home pages in Internet and by the end of the year it will be available to find us from Net.

To finish my brief introduce I can say that all of us have been in front of the same problems that have been discussed here in this congress also. We are doing our everyday work in the hope that art historians and critics will use our archives in the future as they are using it today. We are thinking about objectivity, selectivity, responsibility, etc, and about the importance and meaning of our work in the future... The aim of our everyday efforts seems to be clear, but the way we are approaching it endangers us, and not only our centers, but any this kind of institutions with huge onesideness. Namely, the way of documentation of contemporary art we are used to, brings one in further future to the two complexes of problems.

Onesideness, what means from one side the disappearance of plurality of informational sources as it has been in the past (museums, churches, private collections, galleries, etc.) and from the other side the substitution of abovementioned plurality with archives of all kind informational centers. I will remind the words by Robert Fleck that 20 century art will probably be reserved in archives. This shift is caused by employment of digital technologies in art, of course.

Efficiency of digital databanks is another question. Saving of information is in nowadays much more cheaper and convenient than selective process of this kind. This matter of fact ends up in existence of huge total data banks with no immanent structure (as the nature of contemporary art is turned to be). Consequently, an art historian in the future has to face one, huge and total recourse he can nor use neither avoid.

Never before in the history only one medium - new digitalized technology had owned almost alone the whole position to preserve the information about art. What does it mean for the future, we still don't know. But these are serious, interesting and common problems.