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#### **VEKS: INSTITUTION AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

This my presentation is a reflection on the first field notes I collected carrying out my doctoral research about Vilnius as European capital of culture 2009. Before to go to the main part of my presentation, let me give some theoretical coordinates to explain in a better way my approach.

According the most recent anthropological literature, public events are moments or spaces of a specific society when or where official representations are re-defined and re-interpreted. In this context conflicts and political discussion between public institutions and the so-called civil society start, showing at the same time the production process of what we call culture. Let keep in mind that the concept of culture I refer to in this presentation is the culture of books, performances, arts, the one that stays outside the individual, in theatres, ministry of cultures, etc.

A Public event can be, as Richard Maddox suggests, a moment when social actors can play the different meanings of representation in the social scene. MacAloon reminds us how cultural performances are occasion in which we redefine ourselves as society, we produce alternatives and change official representation, always being the same. In this context, one of the main goals of the modern anthropology is, using Herzfeld's words, the analysis of the public performances related to the representation of culture. It is important to underline that actors of cultural performances aren't impersonal institutions, associations or organizations but the individuals that constitute them. We cannot forget the possibility of "agency", it means the possibility for individuals to execute a public event according official policies (international, national or local) but, at the same time, to keep a space of action in interpreting it. This can modify the representation.

It is useful to consider the cultural performances as a whole, where producers and consumers are members of one big group in which they communicate the representations. This process cannot be interpreted in only one way but it hides multiple levels of meanings.

This introduction, useful to present my scientific approach, let us also to complicate a bit our conception of culture, highlighting the process and the actors that lay behind it.

In the specific case of Vilnius, I will skip the description of how the project is organized in official documents at European and national level.

I would like to divide the big group of cultural actors in three sub-groups: the institutions in charge of the execution of the event: Vilnius- European Capital of culture, named VEKS; the so-called civil society represented by all those non-official organizations and associations involved in the project; the audience, the last recipient of the cultural performance.

Through these sub-groups I describe two critical points that connect their action and show the production dimension of culture.

About official institution it is possible to define its cultural representation according the official documents or clear statements and goals.

Veks institution has been founded in 2006 by two main partner, Lithuanian ministry of culture and Vilnius municipality.

*The aim of the national programme Vilnius – European Capital of Culture 2009, as written on website, is to promote dialogue and tolerance in Europe and other parts of the world, as well as to elevate culture as a virtue in modern society and as the driving force in city development, which will distinguish Vilnius as one of the most modern and dynamic cities in Central and Eastern Europe, known in the world as a contemporary cultural centre of attraction, and one with a unique and apparent identity that is open to new ideas and investments<sup>1</sup>.*

The slogan for Vilnius- European capital of culture is “Kulture gyvai” – Culture Live.

It is a creative programme which has been kindled by Fluxus movement ideas. The movement which coined this name declares that art is in constant flux, a continuous flow which draws everyone in.

VEKS, seems to be more oriented to promote cultural production, innovation, creativity. It underlines the concept of “flux” and claims the involvement of people without giving any direction. It doesn't seem linked to any specific model of culture or representation. In opposite from the idea

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.culturelive.lt/en/vilnius2009/vilnius2009-mission/>

of fixed and existing culture we are used to think about nation-state, veks programme, especially the slogan, Culture live, sounds very “honest” in showing the production side of culture, underling its dynamic dimension. Anyway, this approach chosen by VEKS institution creates few problem when the programme is translated in practical performances.

At the end of 2008, the eve of the cultural year, the world financial crisis forced Lithuanian government to reduce the budget of all the Veks programme. This would mean also to cut some of already selected projects. Till that time the programme was going normally. After this, the projects’ manager of the different selected events organized themselves in a group to affirm their point of view and to ask in official way the criteria according which the already selected projects would be chosen to continue and which one would be cut out.

This moment is a critical point that let me to give a first example of how, in practical life, the dynamic dimension of cultural production come on the stage.

Till the programme was following the plan and everything was ok, I’m talking still about preparation part, before the beginning of 2009, there weren’t big discussion or problem between the institution and the projects’ managers.

When the external general condition changed, it means when world financial crisis started, also the programme had to be modified and, in so doing, we can notice how also the positions of main actors changed. It is in this moment that the civil society come on the stage. in my case, civil society is that group of veks projects’ managers that elected themselves as representative of society and subject to be consulted by official institution in order to be part of the decisional process for re-organization of Veks programme and definition of cultural criteria.

Despite the problem of reducing the events was connected to economical reasons, the discussion focused on a clear definition of culture that till that moment wasn’t necessary. At the beginning the procedure of selection was made by a call for proposal and a list of experts. At that time no big discussion started about the selection criteria. When, at the eve of 2009, some of already selected

projects had to be cut out, the managers claimed for a definition of these cultural criteria for selection.

The second critical point is when a project is successful in passing through selection process and it is funded. When it is implemented it arrives in the social everyday life and provoke reaction of public opinion. This lead us to the third sub-group: the audience.

About the audience, a clear definition of the meanings is more complicated because of the too wide dimension of the category and, also, for the impossibility to analyze the different interpretations that each individual can elaborate according the context. In this case, it is helpful the idea of common sense, defined as the general perception about culture, society and elements of it at work among its members in everyday social life. In my case I tried to get this common sense or, in other words, public opinion through my living here in Lithuania, informal conversations with people and friends and the analysis of mass-media: internet, television and newspapers.

An event can be used as example of public opinion reaction. The event I'm talking about is the installation of three sculpture of modern art along Neris river. This event provoked interest of media and strong reaction from people. I have no time to go deeper into the description of what happened but the discussion can be reassumed in a question asked by a reader in the comment section of a online newspaper. The reader affirms *“anything can be called art and if the artist find his sponsor, this last one will pay for the artwork. In this case, we, the taxpayer are the sponsor, why do we have to buy sculptures we dislike?”*

The public discussion and part of the official critics moved around this main problem: which kind of culture has to be paid by public money? This problem brings us back to the question of definition of what we intend when we talk about culture.

Of course as I wrote above, it is not a solvable problem to define a clear idea of culture according people opinions, it is enough that a group of person express their disagreement for some cultural decision to break the idea of a common unique culture. At the same time, this shows how the idea of unique culture comes from other elements at work more than a common feeling or identity.

A nationalistic representation of culture is more successful among people because of other political interest involved in connecting it to people life and becoming a symbol of identity. More problem arise when a cultural project try to work out of the limit of this representation.

It is exactly what it happens when an European cultural project is elaborated according criteria of innovation and creativity. It looks worth to be funded right for this elements. At the same time, when the same project is implemented in the specific national context, it has to face the national cultural representation.

To reassume, from one side the European capital of culture project is often intended as an occasion to innovate and to give space for creativity. I would say that this is also the unsaid request from European union that has the need to create a common European identity overstepping the national culture. It is, in other words, the practical realization of European slogan “Unity in diversity”. On the other side, at the moment of the practical implementation, each Ecoc has to face the national representation of culture and the common sense at work in the specific country. Anyway, also the national representation of culture is a result of a production process that respond to the needs of nationalistic rhetoric. To present new innovating cultural projects separate from old or classic projects is useful to keep or to strengthen a nationalistic vision of culture, hiding all the other levels that lay behind that particular representation, for example, the legitimacy of the actual bureaucratic system.

The title of this conference is “Innovation, creativity and culture”. Those terms that in the title seems to be in the same group, in the following explanation become part of two different sets. From one side innovation and creativity and from the other side culture, the first one sounds more dynamic, fluid, not fixable in closed definition, the second, for opposition, sounds more static, stable, a crystallized body and, from nationalistic point of view, a symbol of identity.

from an anthropological perspective, to keep the three terms in the same dynamic group seems to be more useful to get what it happens in reality in this kind of public events.

Thanks