

ARTS AS A PROFESSION: CHALLENGES TO THE AUTONOMY AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM

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ABSTRACT

Autonomy of art, understood as the right of artists and arts organizations to operate within their field according to their own normative and organizational principles and behavioural logics, is one of the foundational norms of cultural policy in democratic countries. Artists are autonomous in their work because art is a legitimized profession with its own unique knowledge, skills, and standards of excellence. The professional decisions of artists deserve the same respect as the decisions by physicians, engineers, and other professionals. However, public debates about works of art demonstrate that artistic decisions are constantly challenged by politicians, various NGOs, and the general public. These social groups interfere in the professional field of art and the most common forms of interventions are the denial of the right of artists to implement their own aesthetic decisions regarding the form and content of art works, especially when performed under public commission; the repudiation of the professional decisions of art organisations or other collective bodies (juries, commissions, committees); the evaluation of works of art based on external non-artistic criteria. The paper presents three public controversies concerning the works of art that have taken place in Lithuanian cultural policy over the last decade and analyses the communication strategies employed by both opponents and supporters of these works. The analysis identifies the main challenges to the autonomy of art in Lithuania and explores the ways to overcome these challenges, thereby strengthening the autonomy of art as a profession.

Keywords: autonomy of art, Lithuanian cultural politics, art as a profession, artistic expertise.

Introduction

Artworks that incite controversies and fervent debates within society always are a hot topic in cultural politics, particularly when they have received public funding. Each contentious artwork, often referred to as “uneasy piece” (Silk, 1992)¹, becomes a catalyst for examining and scrutinizing democratic cultural policies, thereby prompting a reassessment of the

¹ The most prominent cases of controversial works of art in America and Europe in 1860-1950 is covered by the special issue “Uneasy Pieces” of *Art Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1, (Spring, 1992). The book by Jane Clapp *Art Censorship: A Chronology of Proscribed and Prescribed Art* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1972) brings together a record of suppression, restriction and restraint of works in the fields of painting, sculpture, graphic arts, architecture and decorative arts from 3400 B. C. to 1971.

established boundaries delineating artistic freedom and autonomy. UNESCO defines artistic freedom as “the freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-State actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the well-being of societies. Artistic freedom embodies a bundle of rights protected under international law. These include: the right to create without censorship or intimidation; the right to have artistic work supported, distributed and remunerated; the right to freedom of movement; the right to freedom of association; the right to the protection of social and economic rights; the right to participate in cultural life” (UNESCO, 2022: 6). According to FreeMuse reports, which monitor violations of artistic freedom, the predominant form of infringement is censorship and the most common rationale for censorship is political motivations: “Artists are commonly subject to censorship or in more severe cases to criminal prosecution for expressing dissent about the way the authorities run their country. They face repercussions for alleged insult of a head of state or state symbols, production of satirical commentaries on political reality in their country or for their active engagement in political events, such as protests, rallies, or public performances” (Freemuse, 2024).

As reported by FreeMuse, in 2018-2019, government authorities were responsible for 72 % of documented violations of artistic freedom in Europe (Freemuse, 2020). However, the incentives to censor artworks on political, religious or moral grounds originate not solely from politicians or governmental bodies. Non-governmental political and religious organizations discontent with how the artworks employ or depict specific political, historical or religious symbols and themes also play a role in instigating censorship. The protests of these organizations against works of art often get support from politicians seeking to benefit from publicity and public approval. Cases of such discontent and protests typically revolve around the narrow interpretations of the *content* of artworks by public, which often diverge from the actual thematic or narrative of the artwork (Clapp, 1972; Atkins, 1991; Beisel, 1993; Berkowitz, 2021).

Compared to infringements on artistic freedom, instances of violation of artistic autonomy are less conspicuous. These cases typically pertain to the *form* of artworks and are more prevalent within the realm of visual arts. Such violations manifest in several forms, including the deprivation of artists' rights to execute their own aesthetic choices concerning the form of artworks, particularly when undertaken under public commission; the rejection of professional decisions made by art organisations or other collective entities (such as juries, commissions, or committees); and the assessment of artworks based on extrinsic, non-artistic criteria. The infringement upon art's autonomy is often perceived as less problematic than curtailing the freedom of self-expression because it does not outright forbid the expression of certain ideas but instead dictates their expression in specific aesthetic formats. Frequently, artists themselves may not recognize such interference as problematic. However, it is precisely from the violation of autonomy that the road to greater censorship begins, which ends in the complete restriction of artistic freedom.

The aim of the present article is to identify the main challenges to the autonomy of art in Lithuanian cultural politics by analysing public controversies concerning the works of art and the communication strategies employed by both opponents and supporters of these works. In the first section of the article – *Autonomy of art as a profession* – I present the definition and scope of the concept of art's autonomy. The second section presents a qualitative analysis of public media discussions around three controversial art cases in Lithuania, identifying communication strategies used by opponents and proponents of these works. The analysis

identifies the main challenges to the autonomy of art in Lithuania and explores methods to overcome these challenges, thereby strengthening the autonomy of art as a profession.

1. Autonomy of art as a profession

In a broad sense, the term autonomy means the capacity to govern oneself, “to live one’s life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one’s own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces, to be in this way independent” (Christman, 2020). In social sciences, the term is applied not only to individuals, but also to organisations and groups. In this context autonomy means “the right of institutions to function according to their own normative and organisational principles and behavioural logics, and a similar right for specific groups (estates, corporations, guilds, professions)” (Olsen, 2009: 441). Autonomy of professions manifest in the power and the freedom to control and regulate work activities within a particular sphere of competence. It can be attributed to individual practitioner and to the profession as a collectivity.

The classical definition of profession, formulated by sociologist Andrew Abbott (1988), defines a profession as a special type of social structure formed to control expert work by monopolizing knowledge in the public interest. Expert knowledge lies at the core of Abbott’s theory, as he outlines professions as primarily defined by a determined assertion of expertise, with each profession competing for jurisdiction over certain types of work and problems that can be resolved through expertise. Abbott also makes a differentiation between the academic realm and the practical work within a profession. While the academic sphere focuses on developing abstract knowledge, professionals and expert bodies utilise this knowledge to address specific cases through diagnosis and treatment. The abstract knowledge generated serves as a basis for legitimising professional practice by aligning it with broader values such as logical consistency, rationality, effectiveness, and progress. Furthermore, abstract knowledge facilitates the education and training of aspiring professionals, and it is geared towards innovating new diagnostic, inferential, and treatment methodologies.

An opposing theory of professions is presented by sociologists that can be broadly characterised as “social constructivist” or “social contextualist”. Regarding scientific knowledge, they hold that its development is shaped by social forces, fundamentally contingent and independent of rational methods, and can be analysed through causal processes of belief formation (Detel, 2001). From this perspective, the role of academia in professional fields is not to disseminate knowledge but to provide status and legitimation. And professions are “self-serving institutions that jealously guard their positions, knowledge and power. Professions are seen to be a solution not to societal problems, but to conflicts between different social interests. Professions strive to attain the position of privilege and then to utilise it in order to maximise privileges” (Nollin, 2008: 22). Professions are thus respected for the knowledge that they are thought to have, not for the knowledge that they really have.

Despite these opposing views on professional knowledge, the everyday practice of laypeople in choosing a doctor, lawyer or technician shows a belief in the existence of professional expertise. This can be seen in situations where one has to choose between several specialists, or between different opinions on the same issue. Typical questions considered in such situations are the specialist’s experience, impartiality, external influences. One of the founders of social epistemology, Alvin Goldman proposes 5 sources of evidence that a layperson may use while deciding to give greater credence to one expert than to the other: “(A) Arguments

presented by the contending experts to support their own views and critique their rivals' views. (B) Agreement from additional putative experts on one side or other of the subject in question. (C) Appraisals by “meta-experts” of the experts’ expertise (including appraisals reflected in formal credentials earned by the experts). (D) Evidence of the experts' interests and biases vis-a-vis the question at issue. (E) Evidence of the experts’ past “track-records” (Goldman, 2001:93). Goldman's argumentation demonstrates how a layperson’s belief in expert knowledge can be justified and highlights the role of expert autonomy when evaluating their claims. Therefore, autonomy is crucial for professions because it allows practitioners to exercise independent judgment and decision-making within their respective fields. It can be understood as a normative concept that is significant component of ethical standards and fosters trust of clients or patients.

Tradition of professional autonomy can be traced to the first regulatory body, the *Royal College of Physicians*, founded by royal charter from King Henry VIII in 1518 and allowed to operate autonomously (Pelling, 1998). Autonomy of medical field became the benchmark for the conceptualising autonomy in other professions. Generally, the state grants autonomy to professions for three reasons: “First, the claim is that there is such an unusual degree of skill and knowledge involved in professional work that non-professionals are not equipped to evaluate or regulate it. Second, it is claimed that professionals are responsible - that they may be trusted to work conscientiously without supervision. Third, the claim is that the profession itself may be trusted to undertake the proper regulatory action on those occasions when an individual does not perform his work competently or ethically. The profession is the sole source of competence to recognize deviant performance, and it is also ethical enough to control deviant performance and to regulate itself in general. Its autonomy is justified and tested by its self-regulation” (Freidson, 1970: 137).

In the context of art, the term “autonomy” is employed in at least four distinct ways, each originating from different disciplines – philosophy, sociology, political science and management. The first way is *aesthetic autonomy*, which is attributed to the work of art. An artwork is considered autonomous due to the unique aesthetic experience essential to its comprehension or the autonomy of aesthetic judgment (Casey, 1973; Jensen, 1953). This idea originates from Kant's differentiation between aesthetic judgment and cognitive and practical forms of judgment, as articulated in the first part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. However, “autonomy” in this usage is more of a metaphor, since the term’s original meaning is political, related to active self-governance or self-determination.

Closer to this political meaning of the term “autonomy” is the second way to talk about the autonomy of art, namely *social autonomy*. In this sense, autonomy is attributed to the art as distinct “value sphere” and describes “the emancipation of art from its historical dependence on the church, the state and the aristocracy. This kind of artistic autonomy has been described by Max Weber as a part of ‘cultural rationalization’ in which science, morality and art are progressively differentiated to form discrete ‘value spheres’, each with its own internal history and learning processes” (Gaiger, 2014: 78).

The third way to discuss the autonomy of art is *political autonomy*, which is prominent in the disciplines of arts politics and public administration (Hillman-Chartrand, McCaughey, 1989; Blomgren, 2012; Mangset, 2009; Quin, 199; Vestheim, 2009). Political autonomy of arts institutions is defined as capacity “to make decisions based on its own laws, rules, norms and ideals, etc., immune from the arbitrary exercise of authority by external power holders” (Vestheim, 2009:37). This kind of autonomy is realized through an ‘arm’s length’ principle,

broadly characterized as the division of powers between government and art organizations, particularly art funding bodies such as councils, agencies, and funds. The division of powers can take various forms, encompassing legal, managerial and programming independency of cultural organizations, or merely a ‘minimum’ of autonomy, such as independent decision-making on arts-related issues. The need for political autonomy of the art is defended by the argument that artistic creativity needs freedom, and the ‘arm’s length’ principle “is supposed to defend the arts against the kind of political abuse that was historically related to the fascist and the communist political traditions” (Mangset 2009: 272).

The *professional autonomy* of artists and art organisations is mainly discussed within the framework of the political autonomy of art (Flisbäck and Lund, 2015; Røyseng, 2019; Wikström, 2023). Definitions of these two types of autonomy often overlap; for instance, professional autonomy of artists is defined as the “possibility to act and make practical decisions as well as to control their own area of competence” (Flisbäck, Lund, 2015: 1). However, political and professional autonomy are granted for different reasons. Political autonomy is granted to art organizations in relation to state funding institutions to avoid the politicization and ideologizing of art, whereas professional autonomy is granted to artists and art organizations due to the general motives of professional autonomy and the unique nature of creative work. Researchers in this field emphasize the negative effects of control and inappropriate external rewards on internal motivation, which is the driving force of creative work (Amabile, 1983; 2012; Frey, 1999). This implies that genuine artistic creativity can hardly exist without professional autonomy.

2. Challenges to the autonomy of art in Lithuania: third cases

Professional autonomy of art in Lithuania has grown during the last 30 years, since the regain of independence. During the Soviet era, culture was viewed in Lithuania as a means of ideological propaganda, and all cultural institutions were state-controlled. From that time, Lithuania inherited the system of state-controlled cultural institutions, including the tradition of direct funding from the national budget through the Ministry of Culture. In 1991, the Lithuanian government undertook the first steps towards decentralization and democratization of the cultural system, establishing the Arts and Culture Council and several other expert councils and commissions that acted as advisory bodies alongside the Ministry of Culture. This marked the beginning of the reform of the cultural sector, which concluded in 2014 with the establishment of three independent cultural funding institutions: the Cinema Center, the Media Support Fund, and the Council for Culture. These institutions operate relatively independently of the Ministry of Culture, provide grants to artists and support projects of art organizations.

1st case: Vilnius “Embankment Arch”

The sculpture “Embankment Arch” was built on river Neris embankment in 2009, as part of the Vilnius European Capital of Culture programme. Organisers of the programme launched the project of the humanisation of Vilnius public spaces that aimed to animate open urban spaces by modern objects of art (Lubytė, 2011). The project was funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, which had allocated 300 thousand LTL for the creation of “site specific” sculptures. 9 proposals were submitted for the competition that were evaluated by an international jury of experts, consisting of three foreign and two Lithuanian experts. The experts selected the three best works that also were approved by the Lithuanian Artists’ Union, the Expert Council of the Architecture and Urban Planning Division of the

Vilnius Branch of the Lithuanian Architects' Union, and the Cultural Heritage Department under the Ministry of Culture.

Vilnius municipality initially approved the building of all three sculptures, but a few days later revoked the permit to build the Ark. The decision was officially motivated by the statement that the sculpture is stylistically dissonant with the Vilnius Castle Ensemble. The chairman of the municipality's Culture, Education, Sport and Youth committee claimed that the city centre was not the right place for such a sculpture. Thus, the municipal authorities repudiated the decision of the professional artists' commission and other artists organisation that the sculpture meets high artistic standards and is suitable for the intended location. This outraged the art community of Vilnius. The Lithuanian section of the International Association of Art Critics published an open letter to the municipality, in which it was emphasized that the sculpture project was very well evaluated by foreign and Lithuanian experts, and that the municipality's decision is "a case of ideological censorship that poses a threat to the diversity of opinions and freedom of creative expression" (7md. 2008 11 07).

After negotiation and persuasion by the project organizers, permission by the municipality was nevertheless given, and the sculpture was erected in early 2009. Soon after its construction, the sculpture was nicknamed "Vilnius pipe" and split the residents of Vilnius into two groups. One group demanded its immediate removal, while the other petitioned for its preservation, claiming it to be an excellent, ironic, and provocative work of art. The sculpture also split the artist community, with several artists collecting signatures for its removal. Despite the negative reaction of the inhabitants of Vilnius, the capital's authorities decided not to eliminate the "pipe" after its exposition time had expired. In 2010, by the order of the director of Vilnius Municipality Administration, the Embankment Arch became a permanent art installation.

The case of the "Embankment Arch" is probably the best-documented case of art controversy in Lithuania, as the organizers of the project "Vilnius European Capital of Culture" collected and published all related documents, public statements, articles in the press, reviews on the internet in a separate book. In total, the sculpture received over a hundred public written reviews and articles, which garnered dozens of comments. Negative reactions displayed in these articles and comments can be categorized into three groups:

- 1) statements that the sculpture does not meet the standards of beauty or professionalism (*"Art must be admirable, not destructive. I want art to educate people", "We can other pipes also call sculptures. There is no shortage of them in the city, and I like them" "I am a plumber and can make hundreds of thousands of such pipes" „The sculpture is neither beautiful nor artistic", "I don't see any professionalism here. Such a pipe can be built by anyone"*);
- 2) statements about value for money (*"those sculptures are a nightmare. It is some kind of creative impotence and the purest waste of money", "it would be better to give that money to someone else", "I would not mind if the author created such art for his own money and showed it in an exhibition. But why is he doing it at the expense of us, the taxpayers?" "It is absurd to pay such a sum and build such nonsense"*);
- 3) statements about site-specificity (*"an appropriate place should be chosen for such structures. After all, it is not necessary to exhibit all your works in the old town of Vilnius. Such modern works contrast too much with the environment", "The sculpture does not fit at all in this place, near the Gediminas Castle. Foreign experts who evaluated the project might not have understood what this place means for us"*).

To summarize, all three categories of arguments *deny the professional competence* of artists, project organizers and the jury. The statements of the first group challenges artists' rights to

execute their own aesthetic choices concerning the form of artworks. The statements of the second group question the competence and the integrity of the project's organisers. The statements of the third group reject the competence of the jury, which selected the projects as site-specific.

The communication strategy employed by the project's defenders was based on explaining the artistic value and meaning of the project, emphasizing the professionalism of the artists and jury members, and accusing the municipality of censorship. Overall, the strategy was successful, as the sculptures were erected in their intended locations, and they still stand there to this day. Nonetheless, the arguments aimed at proving the artistic value of the sculptures cannot be considered successful, as they failed to convince even a part of the artistic community. Six years after the sculpture was erected, some artists were once again collecting signatures for its removal. The accusation of the municipality with censorship also seems not justified, as there was no intention to ban or destroy the sculptures, but rather to relocate them to another site. The most convincing part of the communication was emphasizing the professionalism of the artists and the jury, highlighting their education, awards received, and other achievements. In terms of Goldman's sources of expertise evidence (2001:93), the strategy employed appraisals by "meta-experts" and evidence of the artists past "track-records", such as successful artworks and awards.

2nd case: Theatre Festival "Sirenos" and Romeo Castellucci's play "On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God"

The second notable case of a controversial artwork that involved the public, politicians, and artists in fervent discussions was the performance of Italian director Romeo Castellucci showcased at the Vilnius theatre festival "Sirenos" in 2012. The performance uses Antonello de Messina's Renaissance image of Christ that forms a background of the stage, where actors play a story about the relationship of a son and an old sick father. Some days before the first performance in Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (LNDR), members of the Lithuanian Catholic Youth Federation organised protest campaign at the theatre. The protest was prompted by controversial press reviews on the play in the media of other countries and by a statement (presented as a rumour) in one of Lithuanian newspaper that "during the play the face of Christ is smeared with excrements" (*Respublika.lt 2012 04 05*). The catholic youth accused the LNDR of mockery of Christian symbols.

The statement that the LNDR was preparing an "unprecedented mockery of Christianity, and its symbols" was repeated in the public letter by the Cardinal of the Metropolitan Archbishop of Vilnius, which was read in churches. The letter called for boycotting the play, organising protests and other efforts to influence the festival organizers. The members of Lithuanian Parliament joined the fight of the public opposing the play and prepared a resolution, where they urged Lithuanian society "to boycott the play that offends Christians" and suggested that the play "should not be supported by taxpayer's money" (LR Seimas 2012a). The Parliament had discussed this resolution in three meetings, but did not adopt it, as one of the Parliament fractions requested a break till the next meeting, which was scheduled after the play. When the Parliament didn't officially adopt the resolution, 35 members of Parliament had published it with their signatures (*BNS 2012 10 05*).

The Lithuanian arts news portal Menufaktura.lt published the records of the Parliament debates about the play "as the documents of a historical event which show the attitude towards censorship and art" (*Menufaktura.lt 2012 10 03*). The analysis of these records reveals two

recurring assertions: first, that the performance should not be staged at all because it does not conform to the “majority’s morals”; and second, that the performance might be acceptable to stage, but not in a theatre or festival funded by municipal or state money: “...*the National theatre is financed by the state, i. e. our money, so why does it show to us things that hurts our Christian society? And we only make a statement? Don’t we have the right to show to our society what the majority wants?*” (LR Seimas 2012b).

Public discussions about the performance began approximately one week before it was staged. During that week, about fifty articles, reviews, and news pieces related to the performance appeared in the press. Most of the negative comments by public involved in the controversy were about contempt of religious symbols and insult of religious feelings: “*The play despises the symbols of Christianity*”, “*insults the feelings of the faithful*”, “*deeply hurts and humiliates all the faithful of Lithuania*”. Complaints typically concluded with calls to cancel the performance and expressions of outrage over its funding from public money.

Summarizing the arguments used in this controversy, they can be categorized into two groups. The first group consists of claims that an artwork must conform to the majority's moral views. The second group asserts that artworks not aligning with these views should not be funded by the state budget. The claims in the first category represent a typical infringement on freedom of expression, calling for censorship. The claims in the second category represent a violation of the political and professional autonomy of art, questioning the decisions and standards of professional art organizations.

Lithuanian artists and art critics reacted to the attack on the play and published an appeal as well. It had been signed by 497 artists and art critics. In their appeal, artists declared their trust to the organisers of the festival as well as to the organisers of other 20 festivals, where the play was demonstrated. They also argued that “*the scandal was caused artificially without seeing the performance and based on rumours*”, “*the Parliament cannot sanction works of art and restrict creative freedom*”, “*an artist has the right to be free and to express himself in such art forms as he needs*”, „*we hope that the authorities will not impose on us their views on how to value one or another work of art, nor will it restrict the citizen's freedom to decide for himself on a work of art*”(Lietuvos žinios, 20212 10 05).

Despite protests from the public and politicians, the performance took place and received positive reviews, including from the Catholic community. Thus, the communication strategy of the performance's supporters was successful. Similar to the first controversy, it relied on the explanation of the artistic value and the meaning of the play, appraisal of “meta-experts” (positive evaluation of 20 festivals, where the play was demonstrated) and arguments against censorship, which was a real threat in this case.

3rd case: Monument of Lukiškės square

The third controversial case have three episodes and goes about the monument in Lukiškės square. The square is the largest square in Vilnius, located in the city centre. In Soviet times, the square was renamed Lenin Square, and a statue of Lenin was built in the middle of it. The statue was removed in 1991 and the discussions about the new monument started immediately. In 1999, the Parliament adopted a resolution that ‘*Lukiškės square in Vilnius has to be formed as the main representative square of Lithuania with memorial accents of fights for freedom*’ (LR Seimas 1999).

Till 2024, three contests for the monument had been organised, none of which yielded any results. The first one was organized by the municipality of Vilnius in 2007–2009. The commission of the contest consisted of 21 members, representatives of state institutions, Lithuanian Parliament, sculptors, and architects. After the first stage of the contest, the commission had selected 7 works and presented them to a wider public. The public actively engaged in the discussions, expressing radically different opinions. The Lithuanian Union of Political Prisoners and Deportees, some historians, senior citizens voted for traditional monument, while the younger people preferred an urban space adapted for recreation with historically neutral art object (*15min.lt 2017 12 06*). The commission, feeling the pressure of the public and failing to reconcile the interests of the two sides, postponed the decision of the second stage of the contest and none of the presented projects won the first place (*architektusajunga.lt, 2009*).

The second contest was organized by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture in 2012–2013. Artists submitted 28 projects, which were evaluated by 7 art experts. The experts had selected five projects and recommended to implement one of them – the sculpture “The Spirit of the Nation” (*alkas.lt 2013 07 15*). The contest provoked active public discussions again. 33 NGOs had submitted a petition to the Minister of Culture, where they expressed a negative opinion on the winning project and on the commission that selected it (“*unsuitable composition of the commission, as only two members of the commission were competent in the field of monumental sculpture*”). Arguing against the decision of the commission, the NGOs stated that “*the abstract composition genre is unsuitable for Lukiškės square*” and demanded “*to give priority for the clear and understandable monuments*”, especially to the projects of monuments in the form of traditional Lithuanian symbol Vytis². NGOs also criticized the panel of the commission because “*there were included only two sculptors competent in the field of monument sculpture. Other commission members represented the so-called ‘trends of contemporary interpretive art’, unrelated to the traditional classical concept of sculpture*” (*ve.lt 2015 06 29*). Members of Lithuanian Parliament questioned the decision of the contest commission as well: “*... this is a public project and the opinion of most of the public can’t be ignored. Is it that fair, to decide in a small group, what monument does the nation need and then to implement it for the taxes of that nation?*” (*Alkas.lt 2013 08 13*).

Summarizing the arguments of the controversy on the second contest, they can be categorized into three groups: critique of the winner monument as a piece of an “improper genre”, and the inappropriate composition of the commission. However, this time the petition of NGOs includes a request that the monument should have a particular aesthetic form (“*to give priority for the clear and understandable monuments of Vytis*”) and expresses a negative attitude towards the ‘abstract composition genre’ and ‘proponents of contemporary interpretative art trends’, therefore the petition makes an impression that NGOs take the role of art experts, although no one of them works in the field of arts.

After the second contest, several patriotic NGOs started an active promotion of the idea that the monument of Vytis should be erected in the square. In 2016, the NGOs created a Vytis Support Fund, which announced a contest for Vytis sculptural model. The sculpture, which won this contest was actively proposed for the Lithuanian Parliament and Vilnius municipality. However, against the sculpture had spoken Lithuanian arts critics, historians of arts, scholars of the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute. They published a petition as well, which criticized

² Vytis is an old Lithuanian symbol of the fights for freedom, and it figures on the Coat of arms of Lithuania.

an artistic value of the sculpture selected by the NGO's (*sa.lt 2017 02 23*).

In 2017, the Ministry of Culture together with Contemporary Arts Centre announced the third contest for the monument in Lukiškės square. Artists submitted 32 monument projects. The commission selected 5 of them and proposed for a wide public to vote. Among these 5 selected projects was the statue of Vytis, which won the contest of the Vytis Support Fund. More than 11.000 people participated in the electronic voting. The statue of Vytis received 37.66 percent of votes and 37.55 percent received the project of a young artist representing a hill with a partisan shelter. The later project got the most votes also in the jury voting conducted in parallel – 7 out of 8. So, the second project was announced as the winner (*vz.lt 2017 11 27*).

Three patriotic NGOs were discontented with the result of the contest and expressed their negative opinion in several public petitions and a meeting. The petition stated: *“The competition for the monument to Lukiškės Square was illegal, undemocratic and non-transparent, and its result was determined by a commission, the vast majority of which are guided by openly anti-national and anti-state views.”* The meeting gathered about 500 people who proclaimed a requirement that the statue of Vytis should be erected in the square. Lithuanian Parliament members joined the fight for Vytis. They prepared a law project, which sets that a monument of Vytis has to be erected in the Lukiškės square. 41 members of Parliament supported this law project (LR Seimas 2017). This had got rise to the negative reaction of the cultural and academic community. 166 artists and academics signed a public appeal to Lithuanian leaders, expressing their disagreement with an intention to regulate the square monument by law and claimed that the opinion of experts should not be ignored when dealing with issues related to works of art in public spaces (*15min.lt 2017 12 20*). The draft law had not been considered in the Parliament at that year, but it was remembered again and passed in 2020. The 3rd article of this law states: *“The monument Vytis depicting the symbol of the state together with the memorial to the victims of the freedom of Lithuania is the main accent of the representative square of the Lithuanian state”*. The law created an obstacle to erect the monument that won the competition organised by the Ministry of Culture, thus the third competition's outcome remained unfulfilled³.

This case of controversy stands out due to the active involvement of NGOs in professional art issues, as evidenced by the organization of their own monument competition and its active advocacy to politicians. NGOs not only rejected the decisions made by the artists and the jury arguing by inappropriate selection procedure but also actively asserted their own point of view regarding the aesthetic form of the monument. This strategy proved successful as politicians enacted legislation desired by the NGO, regulating the form of the monument. This was partially achieved because part of the artistic community supported the NGOs and took part in the competition organised by NGOs for the Vytis monument, thereby legitimizing its outcome.

The communication strategy by the rest of artistic community was grounded in professional arguments, explaining why the Vytis monument chosen by the NGOs was unsuitable for the square, and elucidating the advantages of the project that won the competition organized by the Ministry of Culture. However, these arguments were sufficient only to defend the substantive side of the competition. The procedural side remained unjustified. Competition was

³ In May 2024, the portal Made in Vilnius started a poll “Is there still a need for a monument in Lukiškės Square?”. The results were: yes, of course – 462 votes, 26.24 %, no – 1.119 votes, 63.54%, I have no opinion – 87 votes, 4.94%, I don't care – 93 votes, 5.28%. <https://madeinvilnius.lt/en/savaites-klausimas/apklausa-ar-vis-dar-reikalingas-paminklas-lukiskiu-aiksteje/>

criticized by the NGOs because of the legitimacy of the jury and its formation principles, and the institutions that formed the jury did not engage in discussions about this matter. This opened the door for the questions why one or another artist or artistic union did not participate in the commission, and this rose doubt also about the artistic side of the decision.

Findings

These three cases of artistic controversies reveal the most significant challenges to professional autonomy of art in Lithuania that can be identified based on the key social groups actively involved in the controversies – the public, the NGOs, politicians and artists.

The public was the most active group in the case of the Embankment Arch, denying the competence of the artists, project organisers and jury, and arguing that “*the sculpture is neither beautiful nor artistic*”. It should be noted that the Embankment Arch does not express any religious or political ideas or symbols, and the negative reactions are caused solely by its aesthetic form. These reactions can be explained by *low artistic literacy* of the public, i. e. the lack of the knowledge and skills required to interpret art. This challenge was mentioned by many art critics during the project Vilnius European Capital of Culture. The division of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture and Education into two separate Ministries in 1994, caused the decline of cultural education. The joint efforts of cultural institutions, schools, and the Council for Culture to raise the level of cultural education have only become visible in the last five years. These efforts, however, are aimed at young people, while the main problem remains with adults.

In the cases of Castellucci’s play and Lukiškės monument, the driving force behind the controversies were patriotic and religious NGOs. They organised pickets and meetings, wrote public appeals and engaged the media. The negative reaction of the NGO was caused by the artistic treatment of religious or patriotic symbols and ideas. In this case, the challenge is a *narrow understanding of freedom of expression* that includes only inoffensive self-expression, acceptable for everyone. This challenge can be resolved by the joint efforts of journalists, advertisers, and artists associations, as it is common across these fields. Artists’ associations should work to strengthen their reputation as experts in the right to self-expression. These efforts could be promoted by the Lithuanian Council for Culture. For example, Arts Council of England have prepared a comprehensive guide about freedom of self-expression with examples and advice on how to deal with controversial cases.

The third social group that actively participated in all three controversies is politicians. Politicians are sometimes involved in art issues by other social groups, which appeal to them demanding decisions, bans, etc. However, they often engage in discussions and protests on their own initiative, seeking to increase their visibility and popularity. The challenge associated with this group is *populism*, which involves offering simple solutions to complex problems for the benefit of “ordinary” people. In all three controversies, politicians tried to act as arbiters and representatives of the “majority’s” will and opinion. However, this role was successful only in the third case, as they were supported by some artists. Overcoming this challenge requires the solidarity of the artistic community. Disagreements on art issues should be resolved in artistic terms, without involving politicians as arbiters. If the artists community cannot agree on the criteria of expertise and excellence of the monuments, then maybe these criteria do not exist at all, and art cannot be considered a profession.

Conclusions

The professional autonomy of artists and art organizations encompasses the ability to act, make decisions, and control their own area of expertise. This autonomy is granted due to the unique knowledge and skills involved in artists work, self-regulatory organizations, and the unique nature of creative work, which is driven by internal motivation that can be adversely affected by control and inappropriate external rewards.

An analysis of three controversial artworks in Lithuania highlights the primary challenges to the autonomy of art as a profession. The first challenge is the low artistic literacy of the public, characterized by a lack of knowledge and skills needed to interpret art. This issue was frequently cited by art critics during the controversy over the Vilnius Embankment Arch project for the Vilnius European Capital of Culture. The solution of this challenge are joint efforts by cultural institutions, schools, and the Council for Culture to enhance cultural education that have become noticeable in the past five years. However, these efforts mainly target young people, leaving adults as a persistent problem.

The second challenge is a narrow understanding of freedom of expression, which only permits neutral, inoffensive self-expression acceptable to everyone. This challenge can be addressed through the joint efforts of journalists, advertisers, and artists' associations, as it is common across these fields. Artists' associations should work to reinforce their reputation as experts in the right to self-expression, and these efforts could be supported by the Lithuanian Council for Culture.

The third challenge is populism, defined as offering simple solutions to complex problems for the benefit of “ordinary” people by politicians. In art controversies, politicians often attempt to act as arbiters and representatives of the “majority's” will and opinion. However, this role is only successful when politicians are supported by artists. Overcoming this challenge requires the solidarity of the artistic community, aiming to resolve internal disputes through artistic terms without involving politicians as arbiters.

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