

BULGARIA AND SOFIA RECENT HISTORY RECOUNTED THROUGH ART PROJECTS

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This presentation puts together some works of Bulgarian artists that I met during a residency in Sofia through the CLICK Curatorial Residency Programme, initiated by Art Affairs and Documents Foundation and Goethe-Institut Bulgarien, and further supported by the Programme Culture of the City of Sofia.

Since it would be impossible to talk comprehensively about all the residency schedule, I decided to highlight just a few projects that somehow recount the recent history of Bulgaria to give a sense of the context not only in the arts, but also in the socio-political atmosphere of the country.

You will notice that one of the characteristics of Bulgarian art, at least for the generation that lived the Transition Period - the fall of the Soviet Union and the transition to democracy (but also capitalism) - is the blurred boundary between personal and political life, urban context and private sphere, from the publication of

an anonymous unfinished manuscript that Radostin Sedevchev found in a flea market and the iconic project "Top Secret" by Nedko Solakov.

There are other recurrent motifs that I've been noticed, like reflecting on the idea of monument and the change of their role in social life; and also a sort of 'aesthetic of disbelief' - as I call it - which most likely derives from the rapid fall of such a strong ideology such as communism and the realisation of how history is open to sudden discontinuities. Luchezar Boyadjiev, for example, comments on the traumatic experience of a country passing rapidly from one ideology to its contrary using metaphors about religious belief.

Through various practices Bulgarian artists reflects on the political history of the country, social change, urban transformation and vanishing collective memory, with an emphasised personal perspective.

Неизвестен Автор

МОЯТ
ЖИВОТ



Radostin Sedevchev (b.1988)
Real Content (2018)

The project started from the finding of an anonymous unfinished manuscript for an autobiographical book on the flea market in Malashevtsi, Sofia. Radostin Sedevchev, who works mainly from retrieved personal stories and document found in flea markets, describes the finding of a manuscript as <<not that uncommon>>, since, in the end, <<one of the main human goals consists in the act of telling your story>>. This particular manuscript contained though only one chapter, the (in vain) struggle of the writer in the early '80s to realise his dream and travel to America. Besides that, just a table of content, which in minimal words described all the existence of that person, and somehow the part of the history of his country that he experienced. Sedevchev decided to print the book, including the table of content, and the partly written chapter, with all the rest of the book consisting of blank pages.



The City Group (formed 1986) The Chameleon (1990)

In 1989, the regimes across Europe started to collapse rapidly and Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov resigned from power. As a response to this unexpected velocity with which the political situation of the country changed, The City Group (initiated by Philip Zidarov and including Greddy Assa, Svilen Blazhev, Bozhidar Boyadjiev, Andrey Daniel, Vihrony Popnadelev and Nedko Solakov) realised an installation outside the National Palace of Culture in February 1990: a wooden skeleton of a giant chameleon on which 2000 blank Communist Youth membership cards were stapled. The cards were red on one side and blue on the other, so the colour of the skeleton changed rapidly with every wind gust. The installation undoubtedly provoked a strong response, and it was set ablaze the same night.



Nedko Solakov (b.1957)
Top Secret (1989-1990)

This work, that is probably the most emblematic - and the most known - of Bulgarian contemporary art, was the cause of a scandal in the art community in spite of its simplicity: in a wooden cabinet with two drawers, an archive of files ironically tells autobiographical episodes of the artist through personal notes, photographs, drawings, collages, etc. Among these stories, the file *Did I feel remorse...* recounts the story of Solakov's recruitment by and involvement with Bulgaria's Communist State Security, lasted from 1976 to 1983, when he was young and believed in Communism before a dramatic disillusionment that left him with a sense of guilt.



Luchezar Boyadjiev (b.1957)

Fortification of Faith, (1989-1991)

The work consists in more than 140 collages built up as a new Christian narrative in which Jesus has a fictional twin brother. Jesus H Christ and Jesus N Christ were never seen together at the same time, but one was crucified and buried; while the other went on as if resurrected. The installation gave a sharp and ironic reading to the return to religion of the country after Communism, questioning the authenticity of religious faith and of faith in general after the fall of some many illusions and ideologies.

Conceived as an idea in February 1989, and developed in two years, the work bridges over the time before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Block. While using the universally recognisable imagery of the icons and a highly controversial idea of simulation and conspiracy, the work engages with the collapse of society, the vacuum of values and the chaotic reality of the early 1990s in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe.

This was the time of, in the words of the artist <<religion without faith>> when the dogma of communism, was fast replaced by free market economy and parliamentary democracy.



Informational text panel on the left wall, containing multiple columns of text.



Luchezar Boyadjiev (b.1957)
Home/Town, 1998 (2018)

28 A4-sized digital prints of snapshots of the artist's apartment are collaged over the much larger scheme-map of urban Sofia. The photos are commented with handwriting notes that mix personal life anecdotes and public context. In particular the work points to the transformation of the city of Sofia at the end of the '90s when the city experience a transition period to democracy and rapidly evolved from a decrepit post-totalitarian town into a neo-capitalist metropolis, highlighting how the transformation of the city influenced not only the public sphere, but also the private life of people.



My mother has three refrigerators. The one on the left and the one in the center were bought in Moscow in 1957 - just after my brother was born and just ~~after~~ before I was born. The one on the right was bought in 1987 when my parents moved to the new apartment. Only this one refrigerator functions now but my mother wouldn't throw away the other two. She uses them as cupboards to store canned food.

I suspect she identifies the two old fridges with myself and my brother. They are very difficult to clean up.



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Pravdoliub Ivanov (b.1964)
Transformation Always Takes
Time and Energy (1998)

In the installation, 30 hobs with pots were connected through multiple extensions to a single mains socket with the result that the power reaching each of the hobs wasn't enough to boil a pot of water. The work was a metaphor to describe the endless process of political and social transformation that the artist's generation has experienced.



Krassimir Terziev (b.1969)
Transitional Newspaper (2016)

Transitional Newspaper (Newspaper to Watch) is a 100-copy publication based on rephotographed pages from archives of Bulgarian press dated from 1989. The basic principle shaping the selection of images is that the photographs should depict only people whose names we do not know - the wrongly labelled “ordinary people” - and thus no public figures nor celebrities. Moreover, the images are left without explanatory texts, cutting out headlines, articles, captions, etc. This experimental approach tests the impact and communicability of photographic images, and what we understand and remember when placed in front of an image from the recent past (i.e. the transition period that began in 1989 in Bulgaria). *Transitional Newspaper* also aims to make visible how, in what circumstances, and by what ends the media depicts “ordinary people” in photography. The publication was not for sale and could only be used on the spot. People were welcome to fill in the blank areas around the images on each page with a content they found relevant to their experience of the transitional period from 1989 to nowadays.





Krassimir Terziev (b.1969)
Let's Dance. Clothes for
Collective Life (1996)

With the Yugoslav War, a lot of international attention was devoted to Balkan identity. In this work, white shirts are hanging in a circle with their sleeves connected as if there were holding hands, miming the traditional Balkan folk dance known as horo.



Pravdoliub Ivanov (b.1964)
Territories (1995)

A landmark work in this scenario is Pravdoliub Ivanov's Territories presented at the 4th Istanbul Biennial, in which a row of flags made out of canvas and covered by earth was mounted on the wall. The earth covering the flag questioned the meaning of the national in a globalised world, while also remind of the deep relationship between Balkan culture and land.



Krassimir Terziev (b.1969)
Monumental (2011)

In this video, Terziev observes one of the most iconic monuments of Sofia, the Monument to the Soviet Army, which is also one of the most popular public spaces among Sofia's young people. The project aims to investigate the role of urban space in today's Bulgarian socio-cultural life, the lingering (or vanishing) of a collective memory connected to monuments, and the use and abuse of the city space, between community aggregation and misuse of historical landmarks. Accompanied by audios taken from drama films, the tension of the video is more personal than political and transform collective memory into a personal one. In fact, although the monumental stature of the place, the community usage of it makes the memory that it carries less and less visible, substituting it with the modern rhythm of the city and the groups of young girls and boys chatting and skating on the steps of the monument.



Pravdoliub Ivanov (b.1964)

This is not Art, this is a Protest (2013)

In the summer of 2013, Bulgaria was in a political turmoil for months. As described by Pravdoliub Ivanov: <<The Mafia and Oligarchy created by communist party and its Secret Service in nineties, get enough confident and decided to form it's own government this year with the mandate of the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (Former Communist Party) in coalition with the Party of Turkish minority in an impossible combination with a Naci-Homophobic Anti-Turkish Party "Ataka"—a poison coalition. People are every day on the square, marching trough Sofia streets since 14 June. Already 34 days asking the mafia-government to resign. I am on the protest every day with different slogans. On the 28th day I decided just to use the cartoon emoticons describing anger.>>

His slogans during the protests organized in Sofia against the Bulgarian government were repeatedly reproduced by various media both at home and abroad. One of such slogan - the only thoroughly visual amongst them - has been made into artwork. It expresses silent resistance and anger in the language of comic strips: <<It summarises all the other slogans. I made it the day I ran out of words.>>





WORLD NEWS

Bulgaria's 'Generation F' vents corruption ire



Corruption will soon stop unless voters demand reform, say

data for:



North Carolina tax cut plan is last best hope for conservatives

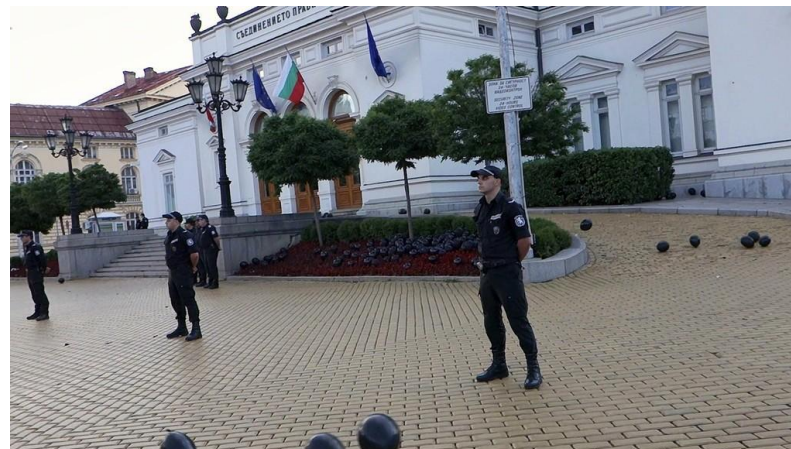
North Carolina's tax cut plan is the last best hope for conservatives, according to a new survey. The plan, which would cut the state's income tax rate from 7.25% to 6.25% and eliminate the state's estate tax, is seen as a key step in reducing the state's budget deficit and stimulating economic growth.

US retail sales fall short of forecasts

US retail sales fell short of forecasts in the third quarter, according to a report from the Commerce Department. The report shows that retail sales were 0.1% higher than a year ago, but 0.2% below what analysts had predicted. This is the first time in three years that retail sales have fallen short of forecasts.

Pravdoliub Ivanov (b.1964)
Black Balloons (2013)

This video work is based on short footage during one of the everyday peaceful, anti-government demonstration in summer 2013 in Sofia. On that particular day, someone of the demonstrators brought hundreds of black balloons spreading them among the people to blow them. Later, marching by the building of the Parliament, heavily fenced and blocked by the police forces, people started throwing their balloons in the guarded area. The footage was almost 360 degrees panorama, but Ivanov chose to use only that part showing the black balloons floating freely through the forbidden space. The critical part of the work is the slowdown, affecting mainly the recorded noise. No additional effects were applied to the sound, which plays a significant role in the work.



Kamen Stoyanov (b.1977)
Noise Trial (2013)

This video documents a performance by Stoyanov in September 2013, responding to the demonstrations in Sofia against the government that at that point were going on, daily, for more than three months.

Inspired by the fact that, during the demonstrations, people were using whistles - amongst other devices to produce noise - in order to emphasize their discontent, Stoyanov takes as a symbol a huge whistle and mounts it on top of a car. While he is driving from the city of Pernik to the centre of Sofia on a highway, the whistle is constantly producing noise.

The performance enhances this political gesture into an absurd hypertrophic statement but is also a reflection on the impossibility to achieve a political change with civil protests.



Dimitar Solakov (b.1977)
New Life for the Past (2015)

A work about the current corruption in Bulgaria, this work by Dimitar Solakov started by chance. << While working on one of my projects I came across the Krakra fortress in Pernik, Bulgaria. I was amazed by the poor quality of the work on the reconstructed section and the fact that the original remnants of the fortress were conserved and exhibited in an even worse manner>>. Solakov decided to document the state of these construction sites - mostly financed with fundings of millions from the European Regional Development Fund - travelling across many of this reconstructed cultural heritage sites, and also discovering that in most cases these locations are not backed up by any historical evidence.





**ХУДОЖЕСТВЕНО ОСВЕТЛЕНИЕ НА
АРХИТЕКТУРНО - АРХЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИ КОМПЛЕКС
:АКРОПОЛ НА ПАУТАЛИЯ:**

BG 0102.03 - 0020 РАЗВИТИЕ НА БЪЛГАРСКИЯ КУЛТУРЕН ТУРИЗЪМ



ЕВРОПЕЙСКИ СЪЮЗ



БЪЛГАРИЯ



ОБЛАСТ КЮСТЕНДИЛ



**ARTISTIC ILLUMINATION OF THE PAUTAIA ACROPOLIS
ARCHITECTURAL - ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMPLEX**

BG 0102.03 - 0020 DEVELOPMENT OF THE BULGARIA CULTURAL TOURISM



Krassimir Terziev (b.1969)
On the BG Track (2002)

The video is a collage of scenes shot on the streets of Sofia with short excerpts from five Hollywood films that mention Bulgaria or discuss some Bulgarian-related cliché like identity, culture, virility, and health. The video sought to examine how the film industry creates certain images of unknown, unfamiliar cultures; but for a non-Bulgarian audience, it also presents some examples of how Bulgarian culture was perceived until recently and the exotic aura surrounding the country before it joined the EU.



