

# **CULTURE OF THE TIME OF TRANSFORMATION**

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## **A PROJECT OF LEAVING THE CLOSED TERRITORY IN THE BULGARIAN ART OF THE NINETIES**

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At the very end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's Bulgarian art witnessed a new effort at overcoming the periphery.

On one hand, this phenomenon can find its place among other, periodically made, efforts throughout the history of present-day Bulgarian art. All these efforts have not been sufficiently clarified either as intentions or as programmes and they had only sporadic results. A recent effort has as a result the fact that today a visiting artist or a critic can find points of contact in the topical Bulgarian art. Is this fact due to the quickly adopted international "slang", to the richer information about it? Isn't this new situation ostensible, and its results - superficial? It is a fact, however, that this international language is broadening its territory in Bulgaria. More and more works of art appear that manage to some extent to take place and communicate abroad.

The space of the so-called new-forms gives more and more information about itself (sometimes this information exceeds the events themselves). This information is disseminated with set purpose in the territory of the international cultural exchange. Is the informational activity - of both artists and curators - capable of overcoming our isolation and reticence? Does the situation have only informational aspect? Does the possibility of direct and immediate contact between all points in the field of culture mean that all the differences in creating and influencing the events are to disappear, does it mean that hierarchies are to be abolished? Are there any obstacles of other nature in the communication of meanings and statements?

All these questions, valid for a more or less isolated and closed situation, actually unite a number of cultural environments differing in their peculiarities (not only in Central and Eastern Europe).

### **Information and incarnation**

Environment with its informational and material aspects, and the position of man in this environment are the immediate artistic objective and means of expression. Topical art in its different forms (installations, multimedia, etc.) directly juxtaposes, confronts and deals with this environment. Environment is its concept-generating field.

In industrially less developed countries the material and informational environment is correspondingly at a lower level of development. As regards information, the differences seem to be decreasing faster. When speaking of information, mostly the one of virtual character is meant.

The split in perception, due to differences between the relative informational adequacy and the material inadequacy of the environment, has almost never been discussed in the critique. The virtual possession and experience of a definite material environment and events can substitute but not replace the material possession and experience. The awareness of this new situation of informational intensity and material insufficiency brings about the possibility of new points of view and meanings in the 1990's.

Mastering this situation is a kind of challenge. To make sense of it artistically, could become a part of the formulation of a modern project for leaving

the periphery, the closed territory, for the coincidence of "here" and "there".

Topical art in Bulgaria often creates its visual expressiveness and informational substance on the basis of firsthand experience gained elsewhere. It tries to formulate meanings mostly understandable "there", but also, valid "here". Owing to the undeveloped and inadequate state of the material environment, social spaces, public consumption facilities, informational media, etc. the individual in Bulgaria, the artist included, does not have the self-awareness and experience (social, either) of the same order as the one brought about by the topical international artistic expression elsewhere.

Thus, in our cultural territory, the artist with topical dynamic thought and artistic ambitions seems to be doomed to be split between "here" and "there", between the material and informational accessibility. The individual, creating artistic facts, strives for leaving, breaking away from the deepening peculiarity of his or her immediate environment and for integrating with the general international stage as language and meanings.

### **The city as a material and informational centre of art**

Amidst the shifting boundaries between "here" and "there" and the pulsating open (central) and closed (isolated) territories, the city stands out - real and tangible - as a complex organism providing the material environment and the informational exchange in contemporary art. In his essay *The City as a Text* (1982) Michel Butor (1) wrote that the function of the city of accumulating texts was likely to be a major one. He pointed out the fact that the first big cities were founded parallelly to the development of writing. In other words, the cities were centres of stored memory, information, experience in materialization. The 20th century art is inextricably bound up with the city's environment.

No matter whether visual art (in its contemporary forms) is an activity, thought, or speech whose meaning has been composed at the moment of creation, or whether it is a fabricated object of a particular kind of durability, it needs, as Hannah Arendt wrote, "the same workmanship which, by means of the human hand, produces the other durable objects" (2). The reality and materialization of the activity, thought and speech, "depend on the same artistry which creates all the other man-made objects". The means of expression, the forms of contemporary art are connected with or still dependent on the material and technological stage of the society as well as on the information exchanged in that society. In our epoch of huge potential and omnipotent information in all the spheres of human activity, the hardware equipment for information interchange amplifies many times the role of the material environment.

On the other hand, all these characteristics of the development of a given society, expressed in a most concentrated way in the city, generate its basic problems as well - political, informational, economic, social, etc. - thus defining the territory of meaning in the art. This relationship between the city and the art has become more evident and direct since the beginning the 20th century, let's recall, for instance, the beginning of futurism in modernism movements.

As you find yourself in a big city you become aware of the adequacy and interactivity between the topical art forms and the material, technological and informational environment, between the problems of man in such an environment, discussed in the mass-media and the universities, and the intellectual field of art.

Diving into the labyrinths of multi-storey car parks, in the cold "cosmic" space of Defense, making my way into the National Archives with the help of an electronic access card for the countless doors, wandering along the

documentation passage of the Orsay Museum which gives you the opportunity to work on the collections via several computer terminals, it dawns on you that the new artistic language, expanding ever since the 1960s, is part of this material, technological, informational environment which changes the self-awareness, the network of relationships, society.

At the first exhibition of "The City" art group in Sofia in 1988, some crushed tins of Coke attractively peeped out from a rubbish-bin (an object of art); such tins were not sold in our country at all at that time. Was the paradox of the "conversion" of meanings apart of the author's intention or was it just a subjective perception of mine, I could not find out. That kind of "rubbish" seemed rather luxurious, having in mind the state of trade in our country in those years. But how can one make an artistic object out of home-made packings? If you exhibit a likely piece of rubbish, you will result in an artistically unacceptable and incomprehensible elsewhere literal object.

The quickly changing and developing environment generates the new position of man in it, new meanings. In this aspect we can speak about topicality and non-topicality (or non-centrality, periphery) of the meanings, and therefore, of the artistic phenomena, too, which express them, deal with them and manipulate them.

### **Topicality and periphery of meanings**

In the outlined framework of discussion regarding contemporaneity, the issue of centrality and periphery is no longer a question of the primary or secondary origin, of the existence or lack of complexes. It is the question of the topicality of the artistic notions and meanings on an international scale, of their adequacy compared to the general, unifying material and informational environment, and to the human situation in this environment.

It turns out that one of the most essential aspects of the possibility of leaving the periphery, the isolation, of the unification of "here" and "there" in the sphere of visual arts (but not only there) is the change in the material and informational environment, the development of urbanity. "... no activity could attain perfection unless the world provides a suitable place for its practicing. Neither education, nor ingenuity, nor talent would be able to substitute the constituents of the public sphere which make it a suitable place for human perfection", wrote Hannah Arendt (3).

The exhibition *Fluxus in Germany*, recently held in Sofia, reminded us of these relations once again. In our country (Bulgaria) the fluxus feelings of the transience of the material world, the iconoclastic spirit, the anarchist energy against the consumer society could not have been put on the same grounds in the ninety-sixties, in a materially undeveloped and in many respects primitive urban environment. The television in Bulgaria, for instance, started in 1961 whereas in France or the USA regular emissions were begun before the Second World War. In 1961, when Nam June Paik used the portable video camera for the first time, the Bulgarian artists were hardly interested in its existence. The social and political environment of the art determines the topicality and periphery of the meanings expressed by this very art. Meanings topical in the frame of a given society can prove to be peripheral on the international stage, and vice versa. Because the "international order" in art just as history in general are created from the position of the most developed in material, technological and informational aspect societies and following the criterion of the influential novelty which is also the carrier of the topical in an international frame meaning.

Under these conditions, the contemporary art of Bulgaria could become topical in an international frame and at the same time adequate in the place where it is created, provided there is comparable material and informational environment. That would mean not only comparable practical opportunities and means but "compatibility" and a meeting point of notions and meanings.

In the field of the topical art in Bulgaria, artists and curators who have taken up and invested in the project for leaving the closed territory, the periphery take advantage, within their personal means, of the changes in the informational environment. The use of fax, computers, e-mail, the access to Internet provide the vital link with the world of art. Today, the English language and the keeping up of active correspondence are an essential part of the artistic existence. The problems are centred on the immediate (without a mediator) achievement of topical meaning as well as on its incarnation in a piece of art.

As regards the growing intensity of the informational field, the art museums in the country are still rather passive. The practical means of communication, the active contacts and correspondence with related institutions abroad, the exchange of information and works of art seem not to be considered as a vital necessity for leaving the isolation. The expression of the past experience in the materialization of ideas, the dealing with its meanings and its integration in the general art history of the 20th century should be perceived as an essential part of the project for "opening" the territory as well as for the migration of topical art.

### **The missing meanings**

Setting it as their task to join in the topical "general conversation (discourse)", some authors deal with topics and conventions which are not valid in our cultural space, with "missing" meanings. (To a certain extent that was the case with the so-called "feminist" exhibition *The Erato Version* in 1996 or works raising homosexual problems.)

The "missing" meanings suggest missing features, and the difference of our cultural space when compared to the general one, i.e. the one belonging to the most developed societies in material, technological and informational aspect. We are reminded of these missing meanings in trans-border professional contacts when, very often, common problems arise: problems connected with the artistic manifestations of the feminist movement in the country; with the manifestations of the national minorities art; with the artistic campaigns against AIDS, or with the themes of art and ecology. When, three years ago, I was asked why the theme of AIDS - the sinister illness of the 20th century - was missing in Bulgarian art, I had to quote our official statistic data of less than 100 registered cases of AIDS. Certainly, the changes in society bring about new problems — the ones which are not topical today will become such tomorrow. The artist, however, cannot wait; he or she is striving for artistic appearance on the international stage at this very moment. That is why the step towards the programme filling in of missing topical general themes in our country is fully explicable. However, the question of its effectiveness and self-sufficiency in both national and international contexts remains.

The missing "here" has always been an essential coordinate of the cultural situation. The actual overcoming of the limitations and the periphery of the environment would find an expression in the ability to manifest a new generally valid content, a content which is absent even "there", in the topical general field of meanings.

### **Personal migration projects**

In the 1990's different personal intentions and projects for joining in the "general conversation (discourse)" appeared in Bulgarian art, they strive after leaving the closed territory and, in one way or another, they avoid the interdependence between meanings and environment.

It seems that the artist who most consistently and successfully carries out his migration project is Nedko Solakov. The conceptual substance of his multi-componential installations and artistic performance is based on great universal cultural narratives. However, the problem that has recently arisen concerns his realizations in our country. The materialization of the artist's projects in Bulgaria is far from the scale of his performances on the international stage; the differences between the local and the topical international conceptual context had as a result the complete non-communicability of his artistic performance in the National Art Gallery in Sofia in 1996.

Since the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's points of contact between "the national" and "the general", between "here" and "there" have been searched for and found in several aspects.

Social art in Bulgaria did not develop. In spite of separate works of art performances, which are worth being remembered (*Handclapping Machine* by L. Kostov, *A Look in the West* by N. Solakov, *The Chameleon* performance of *The City* art group, all of them having taken place in 1990, etc.), our social art was far from the scale and, what is more, from the international popularity of the artistic facts of the Russian art as well as those of the Polish, Czech, Hungarian, and some other countries' art. Social space guarantees the relative common ground of the meanings and the topicality of statements. In Bulgaria, however, there is a lack of artistic experience and of motivation for gaining such experience.

In the field of conceptual strategy art, there is a relatively greater number of artistic works of wider social and moral parameters, works which raise the problem of the religious mainstay, faith and the missing faith... (Luchezar Boyadzhiev's *Strengthening of Faith* in 1991, Kosyo Minchev's *Inwardly* in 1996).

Universal human problems are treated in some works of art involving the artist's identity, his or her role of a provocateur and a denouncer of conventions and prejudices. The artist often turns his own body both into an object under observation (physical observation included) and into a means of expression.

The self-awareness, the body, the contact with others - that is where the most successful recent realizations fit best. Quite often the basic means of expression is photography (Pravdolyub Ivanov's photo-installations: *Personal Pronouns* and *Between Thought and Speech*, Galentin Gatev's multimedia *Corpus Alienum* etc.). The human body as a module of meanings provides a greater opportunity for general accessibility and universality of meaning. The general and universal is also aimed at by other artistic works regarding the meaning of the body as an erotic object

Another possibility of common ground and coincidence of meanings and notions, having come into being in different environments, is the very informational aspect of the environment. Everything pertaining to information and its facilities: the press with its visuality, the electronic media, computers, Internet (an idea rather than a practice) gives huge opportunities for breaking away from the closed territory (good examples in this respect are Ventsislav Zankov's multimedia installation *The Last Supper* in 1995, Kosyo Minchev's *Police* in 1995, Luchezar Boyadzhiev's work in the Artbook exhibition in 1997).

The book as a product of culture has its own specific role as a meeting point of meanings and notions. The interest in the artistic book (or the book of the artist) has recently become topical both in Bulgarian and in the general artistic field.

It seems that the most rarely taken decisions concern the exhibition of the differences in the material and informational environments "here" and "there", in the closed and the general space. They raise the problem of the otherness itself, or more precisely, they state the problem and decipher it artistically (Kiril Prashkov's texts written with wattle fences, vegetable symbols, and baroque broilers of 1996-1997; Adelina Popnedeteva's mats knitted from glossy packings and named *Sweet Life*, her gorgeous dresses made from rubbish, columns from corrugated cardboard, and plastic bags cherishing the image of the woman, in the period of 1994-1997, etc.) This pauperization of the incarnation is adequate to the elementary nature of the environment, to the trite repere of our existence. It can hardly be understood or felt in a materially well developed society, but it formulates and expresses new meanings in a situation in which the ready-made or objet trouvé turns into rubbish-art.

The project for leaving our closed artistic territory or rather for opening this territory for migration of topical facts and meanings cannot be adequately carried into effect if limited to the artistic field. The project can be paradoxically formulated as establishing a conformity between the environment (material and informational) and the culture which is topical on an international scale, i.e. as a creation of the realia still missing "here". Thus, the tension of the split of compromise could be reduced and the contact of meanings, the path of artistic communication, could be provided.

1 M. Butor, *Repertoire V-La ville comme texte*. Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1982.

2 Cf. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958.

3 Ibid.