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In the Local Discourse, as in the  
International Context

[3.880 words]

**Bulgaria**



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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

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All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I\_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, [www.institute.hr](http://www.institute.hr).

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Iara Boubnova

## In the Local Discourse, as in the International Context

Addressing cultural issues, having a vision, keeping up, negotiating, arguing, discussing, debating, insisting, persisting, assisting AND commissioning, counseling, facilitating, developing, criticizing, overviewing, keeping deadlines, AND educating, mediating, bridging the gaps, communicating, serving, daring, begging, AND administrating, typing, photocopying, standing by the phone for weeks, mailing, faxing, AND designing, managing, organizing, coordinating, overcoming obstacles, oversocialising, networking, promoting, speaking for others, AND finding solutions, framing, hanging, nailing, hammering, painting walls, gardening, cleaning, sweeping floors, serving coffee, invigilating, AND failing, and succeeding.

(in: Marina Fokidis. Dispatch #1 in Creative Curating, Visual Arts Department, Goldsmiths' College, London)

And compromising, compromising, compromising....

I was planning to start my text with the comfortable opposition between the concept of the curator using a definition of this profession taken out of some respectable "western" encyclopaedia, on one side and the lack of such definitions in our local context. I started looking in Britannica, went through the Academic American Encyclopedia and Collier's Encyclopedia as well as the Internet. But I found only descriptions of curators' duties within the framework of the museum institution. A curator is "an art historian who is knowledgeable regarding the physical properties of hand-made objects ..., has a general background in the history of art..., oversees existing objects in the collection...; the installation... is planned and supervised by the curator, who determines the number of objects to be

shown and organizes their sequence and arrangement for maximum historical, contextual, and aesthetic coherence<sup>1</sup>". None of these publications mentions the free-lance curator, this "personage-orchestra", whose multifunctional activities concerning the invention, organization, installation and display, as well as the promotion of exhibitions of contemporary art, necessitated the need for this new word in our language. Naturally, we did have a term of our own to signify the museum employee. However, it did not cover the specific complex of curatorial rights and duties located between freedom of invention and dependence on a group, along with all of its additional exterior and interior associations and energies. It turned out that such a "basic definition"<sup>2</sup> of an activity which is practiced by hundreds of people all over the world, people who make a living out of it, get prizes for it and even form a well acknowledged international hierarchy, some members of which I know personally, is lacking – and not only in our context. Presumably, the objectives of a curatorial practice within a context where the art infrastructure has been established a long time ago and does not offer any surprises are quite clear, maybe even self-evident. The sphere of curatorial practices is fairly wide, located somewhere between the field of academic art history/theory and the management of art, while often spilling over into both these bordering areas. A curator addresses simultaneously the artists and the audience, he/she is involved with the mass media and constructs and operates within a certain budget and through all of these, presumably, formulates "aesthetically and intellectually challenging experiments in contemporary art." A curator is a multifunctional mediator.

In our (Bulgarian) language, the word "curator" appeared quite late, only at the beginning of the 1990's. It was first used publicly and officially by Luchezar Boyadjiev when he was organizing the Bulgarian participation in the 3rd International Biennial in Istanbul, Turkey (1992). However, the unofficial and informal use of the word was introduced a bit earlier, around the mid-1980's, by the same person after his return from a prolonged stay in New York. Naturally, the term is borrowed from English and the confirmation of its right to existence and usage took a long time and many efforts<sup>3</sup>. The use of the term "curator" signified a decisive break away from the politicized context of the word "commissar" which also had a distinct

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<sup>1</sup> Academic American Encyclopedia, op cit., p 658.

<sup>2</sup> Definitions of leading concepts within Marxist-Leninist philosophy that could not be subjected to further unsanctioned interpretation were called "basic."

<sup>3</sup> There was an additional difficulty here because in Bulgarian the word "curator" is directly associated with one of the slang words for "penis"; this creates specific difficulties for female curators practicing in this country. I should also like to express my gratitude to Bojana Pejić who informed me about similar problems with the word "curator" in Germany at the beginning of the 1990's.

“smell” of militarized ideology. This had been used prior to that time by the bureaucratic Union of Bulgarian Artists to signify the responsible person who had been officially nominated to realize a concrete exhibition from the Year Plan.

However, it is possible to describe as “similar to curatorship” some activities that took place earlier. It is a paradox but in Bulgaria, which followed very strictly the socialist model for the functioning of culture up until 1989, a lot of things in culture depended on specific individuals. When in the mid-1970's Ljudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the then Party Leader, acting in her capacity as Minister of Culture, decided to establish a museum for foreign art in Sofia, she was actually realizing a gigantic curatorial project. Using her own taste, and the help and advice of various Party friends/experts, and with state funds, she purchased art works from all over the world in order to compile a collection, which was eclectic in both content and quality. At the same time, a pompous building was erected in the centre of the city to house this. In 1985, four years after the death of Ljudmila Zhivkova, a State Museum was opened in her name.<sup>4</sup> This initiative was part of the governmental objective to “open up” the country to the world. The uniqueness of this project consists in that for more than a decade it oriented and defined the concept that Bulgaria had of foreign art. A concept based largely on the achievements of figurative painting during the twentieth century.

The bureaucratic Union of Bulgarian Artists was also realizing its policies and activities during the 1970's and the first half of the 1980's in the form of an unconscious curatorial project of numerous juried, thematic, national art shows/surveys<sup>5</sup>. These not only categorized Bulgarian art according to different interests but also formulated a State-sanctioned, stable, internal and “quality” oriented hierarchy of participants who had necessarily to be members of the Union. Keeping in mind that the country did not have any other alternative for contemporary artists and that foreign art was shown only in the context of State organized international “cultural exchanges”, the hierarchies designated by the Union signified (and for the majority of its members still very much do) hierarchies in international art as well. This is a good example of “governmentality – the administration of individuals and populations” (Foucault).

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<sup>4</sup> It is now called the National Gallery for Foreign Art.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, regular exhibitions entitled “Man and Labor”, “The Land and the People,” “Man and Art”, as well as many shows dedicated to concrete events from the history of the country.

That is why the main problem which faced the younger generation of artists and art critics in the middle of the 1980's was the free presentation of artists outside the official structure and, naturally, this comprised the younger generation itself. At first, the breaking away from the framework of the official institutions took the form of happenings, collective initiatives of artists, actors and musicians, almost always realized in the open air. These events originated almost spontaneously and were based on relations of friendship. The use of unexpected, alternative spaces<sup>6</sup> symbolized stepping away, new freedoms, the otherness of the art itself. The "multimedia" interests of the participants were seen as a chance to attract a wider and more diverse audience/participants. The total lack of communication outside the participants' circles, the lack of an audience and the "uselessness of art" in society were gradually being acknowledged as serious problems for contemporary art. Individual initiatives became the foundation for transforming the public for art as well as its production and a number of exhibitions of the art of the younger generation at the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's were defined as "experimental". This was a time of disputes and discussions, of dialogues printed in the Press in which both organizers and participants in such events attempted to ask and answer questions about the shortcomings of their working environment. Some of the discussions attracted the participation of the "ordinary audience" itself which functioned as a spontaneous and highly aggressive critic.

In 1986 the stage designer Elena Ivanova and the art critic Philip Zidarov had organized the show "The Artist and the Theatre". Their purpose was to re-think stage design as a form of installation and this was the first appearance of such an attitude on the Bulgarian art scene. For nearly a decade after installation was the most typical art form which labelled the "difference" between new art and artists and the traditional ones. Its language, which was based upon a large number of different elements encompassed within a single framework, not only provided a free space for new, personal narratives but also simplified their inclusion into post-modern discourse. The creation of installations became synonymous with the creation of contemporary art. The first attempts to analyze installations as an art form radically changed the language of Bulgarian art criticism and

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<sup>6</sup> The courtyard of Sofia University (organizers Philip Zidarov and Solomon Passi, 1987); city squares (Lyuben Kostov, 1988 and 1989); the lobbies of Sofia University – a series of shows (organized by Georgi Todorov, 1989 and Luchezar Boyadjiev, 1990); the roof of the Union of Bulgarian Artists' building ("Earth and Sky", 1989 – organized by Diana Popova and Georgi Todorov); the abandoned brewery in the center of Sofia (organized by the Group Art in Action, 1991); the physical spaces of some official events (The City Group, 1988, 1989), etc.

drastically uprooted it from the cosy descriptions of story and form in which it had been safely cocooned since the 1970's.

The series of "Open-Air Studios" (1987, after an idea by Diana Tousheva, a journalist, officially supported by the newspaper "People's Youth") was an attempt to stimulate the art market by exhibiting works around the outside walls of the Sofia Municipal Art Gallery, on the streets where the passer-by was necessarily a viewer as well as, occasionally, a buyer of art. This project opened up a debate on the free art market, which was quite a radical issue within the Socialist State Economy. Later, during the exhibition "Moderate Avant-garde within the framework of Tradition", organized on the rooftop of the Artists' Union in the summer of 1990, myself and the art critic Diana Popova consciously "became" dealers and actively sold (!) works by younger artists. As part of the show "E/A" ("Artist's Proof"), organized in 1987 by the graphic artist Kiril Prashkov and Philip Zidarov, an educational program was offered to the public for the first time along with the possibility of experimenting with new graphic techniques when creating 3D works/installations. These various techniques were not only demonstrated and explained to the public but also their products were offered for sale at very low prices by the artists themselves. Following the suggestion of Luchezar Boyadjiev, this exhibition/action ended with the public creation and printing out of a collective work (more than 20 participants), which turned into a symbolical shaping of the new artistic community.

In Bulgaria the professional identification of curatorship as a complex responsibility was accomplished in 1988 by Philip Zidarov in the exhibition "The City?". By selecting the participating artists and discovering a vibrant focus for their experimentation, by having the idea of reconstructing the existing reality of culture, in other words, by "seeing" the situation, he put the individual pieces/artistic reflections/artefacts "together again", and by doing this was able to uncover the identity of the time.

As I have already mentioned, the first public, official use of the term "curator" in Bulgaria is related to the Bulgarian participation in the 3rd Istanbul Biennial in 1992. For the first time this was organized not through the official "delegation" of artists who, in the view of some administrative authority, were worthy of representing the national culture abroad, but according to the established "rules" of the international art community. Luchezar Boyadjiev, had been asked by Vasif Kortun, the Chief Curator of the event, to formulate his curatorial concept in accordance with the general idea of the Biennial and to invite three Bulgarian artists after a

careful selection of their already existing works<sup>7</sup>. Through this extremely successful participation,<sup>8</sup> contemporary art in Bulgaria won legitimacy as part of the international art context.

In a situation of complex and sometimes dramatic ideological and administrative-bureaucratic struggle, the independent realization of art exhibitions was beginning to be recognized. The term “curator” was loaded with manifesto and program-like connotations in a process of confrontation with the conservative post-ideological context. Everyday reality after the changes of 1989 “mixed” art life with the larger political agenda and forced it to react to the instability and insecurity of the time. The uncertain and inchoate character of the situation, the contradictions between acquired freedom and lost security had overwhelmed any immediate artistic concerns. The need to rethink certain stereotypes, to analytically dismantle previous realities, to indicate new perspectives, to speak more of the future than of the past materialized in the responsibilities, which now had to be assumed by the curator(s). Not only in Bulgaria but in the whole post-totalitarian region, the curator(s) turned out to be an alternative and progressive voice within the social and political debate about the nature, substance and meaning of contemporary culture. The instrument of the curator, the representation/visualization of group tendencies and individual artistic pursuits, is a powerful tool not only in the formation of a new conceptual space for art but also in encouraging artists to exploit a specific cultural moment. Using their professional background as art historians and critics, the organizers of “independent” art exhibitions reflected on relevant critical practices which in turn highlighted sensitive subjects in the life of society and provoked discussion not only in professional circles but within a wider, distinctly younger, audience. According to Foucault “knowledge has implications for power” and the curator(s) in the post-socialist period of transformation have found themselves to be the constructors of an intellectual, aesthetic and practical context for art. They visit artists’ studios, discuss and research issues with artists as well as making more routine, almost statistical, calculations (male/female, age groups, etc.) and follow ups on intellectual and market trends. But they also strive to get artists to “squeeze out” art works that are not illustrations but more like paradigms of their context. It should not be forgotten that in spite of the ideology of collaboration, the curator(s) still reserves the right to cast a

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<sup>7</sup> Lucchezar Boyadjiev. *Balkanization of Alpa Europea*. Catalogue of the 3rd International Istanbul Biennial. Istanbul, 1992. The artists were Lyuben Kostov, Georgi Rouzhev, and Nedko Solakov.

<sup>8</sup> For some reflections on this see: Kim Levin, “Significant Others in Istanbul”, *Village Voice*, 1.12.1992; Geneva Anderson, “New Noah’s Ark”, *ARTnews*, January 1993; Adriann Dannatt, “Turkish Biennial”, *Flash Art*, 168, Jan/Feb 1993; Christian Kravagna, “3rd Istanbul Biennale”, *Kunstforum*, 121, 1993; Richard Dorment, “Noah’s Ark on the Golden Horn”, *Visual Arts*, 1993.



“distanced, removed look” at the individual artefact, as well as, over the entire local art process. Exhibitions may employ the strategies of provocation, textual reconstruction, experimentation, public debate, educational seminars, peer-group dialogues with artists<sup>9</sup> and so on as part of their arsenal. Faced by a vast number of pressing problems from everyday-life, curators' activities are mainly directed towards making group shows and forming group shows. In a situation that lacks an art market as well as qualified art dealers, local collectors and an educated (used to art) audience, the curator(s) accumulates in his/her hands a lot of the “power” of the connoisseur and the owner, the promoter and the strategist, the ideologist and the manager, as well as, the total communicator<sup>10</sup>.

As long as it is difficult to speak of the integration of all our art practices from the peripheries into the international art world, but rather of presentations there as individual manifestations, it is obvious that these will quite dependent on "curatorial power". It is accomplished through the finding or shaping of the presentation of the local according to the proper foreign context. The ability to “organize” an art show outside one’s own country, which in our situation involves knowledge about the dominant discourse, as well as an ability to secure funding, to handle domestic and foreign “red tape” (not to mention such small details as the knowledge of a foreign language, of professional hierarchies, of key figures and key words for communication), endows the figure of the curator with a specific aura of power. Currently it looks as if the beginning of an artistic career within the public domain is almost entirely dominated by curators’ ambitions. This is especially true for an artist who has either rejected the mediation of the traditional Artists’ Union or Artists’ Associations, or who doesn’t fit into their narrow lines of corporate subordination. Regardless of the gender of the curator and even when he/she is awarded the full mystique of mystified power, he/she is subjected to a self-perception and reflection of the type known in the Western context as “the situation of women curators”<sup>11</sup>. More often than not, the role of the Mother is projected onto her/him: growth and comfort must be provided, all inconsistencies in professional standards should be accepted with “tender” affection and bohemian mischief must be

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<sup>9</sup> For example, some of my projects realized both in and outside Bulgaria: 1. "Cream-art" (1991) - 18 participants; 2. "Object - Bulgarian Style" (1993) - 26 participants, along with Maria Vassileva and Diana Popova; 3. "In Search of Self-Reflection" (1994) - 23 participants; 4. "Projects by..." (1995) - 7 participants; 4. "Erato's Version" (1997) - 20 participants, along with Maria Vassileva; 6. "Bulgariaavantgarde" (1998) - 8 participants.

<sup>10</sup> There are of course some exceptions to this, for instance, the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov who has all of the above-described qualifications and is a unique example of successful self-curatorship.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Macgregor, “The situation of women curators”, *New Feminist Art Criticism*, (Katy Deepwell ed.), Manchester, 1995.

forgiven. Thus, on the level of collaboration the curator is grounded into some sort of family situation where the problem of the generation clash is translated into the right to criticize the strong one or the one who has been declared strong. The curator is no longer a mediator between the world of the artist and the real world, but a protector from any trauma which the world might inflict on the artist. The role of the husband in its most conservative interpretation is also apposite: any attempt by the curator to work with other artists is treated as an act of adultery, not to be forgiven and even to be punished. The “husband” artist enjoys a lot more unaccountable liberties for he/she is after full creative satisfaction. The function of the seducer is quite obvious as well: an ability to fund-raise in the totally sponsorship-unfriendly conditions of the post-socialist, semi-state/semi-Mafia economy is founded on the ability to charm in an intellectual, or even a sexual way, depending on the circumstances. And of course, the curator must be a superman: he/she must invent titles for the works, make translations of artists’ statements, get interviews in the main news broadcasts, handle heavy stuff and endure sleepless weeks all as just part of the regular demands of the work.

But the illusory concentration of power/slavery in the figure of the curator (in any case, the space occupied by contemporary art in the post-totalitarian countries is microscopic) has other, even more negative aspects. The State Administration is unable to fit the figure of the curator into its bureaucratic register and does not acknowledge his/her distinct professional status and often doesn’t even notice it. On the other hand, however, the State is quite happy that “things appear to be going on by themselves” in the contemporary art scene and does not provide any support even for officially initiated and/or nominated projects<sup>12</sup>. The most active curators in Eastern Europe belong, provisionally, to that generation which came of age within the system of conservative art historical education which provided an inadequate preparation for the full spectrum of tasks and responsibilities that now need to be carried out. Most of my colleagues go on post-graduate specialist study abroad usually on short-term residencies which are a source of ready-made models and methodologies which can then be “imported”. Their adaptation to the local context is a form of self-colonization. In spite of their efficiency in their own contexts, when transplanted to a different soil these models often accentuate the “foreignness” of the curatorial position as a whole and often just confuse artists. In their turn, artists suspect that their theoretical/organizational partners harbour a contradictory “will to create

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, all the eight exhibition projects which I have realized outside Bulgaria, including national presentations in big international biennials, have all been sponsored by foreign sources.

art" which is perceived as an import from outside, showing rational Western influences which may undermine their own demiurgic status. Some additional complications come from the fact that currently in the post-totalitarian countries the energy of the art being made is far greater than the energy of its interpretation, archiving, collection, preservation, study, teaching and so on. The construction of context, which is the task, and practice of the curator, is hard to perform in a situation of heavy "institutional deficit". That is why in so many of these countries, curators are trying to build up a new paradigm, in which their own function in the communication and representation of art can substitute for the lack of art institutions. They search for possibilities to compensate for the deficiencies of local art institutions through an energetic exchange of art information (communication of art, art works, artists, art discourse, etc.) with art institutions located outside the country; as well as by transforming their personal archives of documentation so that they may function as museums of local contemporary art. One of the most important "beyond/inside the profession" goals is to find a constructive use for this self-imposed colonization (through adopted methodologies and practices) by exporting the local product of art or by showing international art with local "curatorial instruments". As a result of this the curator who initially appeared on the art scene as a free alternative is currently turning into an institution which is based on communication and friendships such as, for instance, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sofia, which was established in 1995. The purpose of such an infrastructural entity is not so much to protect its members from their environment but more to produce molecules of artistic context that can later merge with other local or international entities of a similar character. Victor Misiano coined a very clear definition of this new type of art institutionalization: "confidential community – is a direct reaction to the mad dynamics of social transformations. Its efficiency in such a situation lies in that it is the only type of social institution, in which time is not determined by external circumstances: it is determined by the participants themselves"<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Victor Misiano, "Institutionalisation of Friendship," *Transnationala*, Ljubljana 1999.