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Post...- What? Neo... - How? For  
Whom, Where and When?

[2.544 words]

**Bulgaria**



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Institute for  
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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

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.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the [info@institute.hr](mailto:info@institute.hr).

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.

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## Post...- What? Neo... - How? For Whom, Where and When?

The definition "culture at a time of transition", planted at the core of this meeting reminds me of another definition that I was confronted with some ten years ago around the beginning of Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika. At that time Sofia was visited by one highly placed in the state's ideological hierarchy Soviet philosopher, Moisei Kagan, who delivered a cycle of lectures in the Sofia University. I don't remember all details of his talks devoted to the ethics, the sense of history, the inner freedom of the creators of culture in the socialist society and some other obligatory for that time topics. But I remember distinctly that the audience was impressed by the liberated language and the liberal views of this official lecturer that were quite unusual at the time for our situation. One of his ideas in particular, an idea he came back to over and over again, produced a specifically shocking effect - the idea that all problems in our culture originate from the experimental nature of the society we live in. "Don't you ever forget that you live in the experiment", was the straightforward statement made by this then authoritative lecturer.

Ever since that time whenever our reality is trying to define itself by various "post" concepts such as: "post-totalitarian", "post-industrial", "post-modern", etc., I always add out loud or in my mind - "...and post-experimental". Immediately after 1989 I cherished the illusions that we are heading back to some norm even though its parameters are defined by the comparison with the situation "outside". During the last few years I started to realise that the situation is getting even more complicated because everything points out that we are actually entering still another experiment.

And if the first one was the one of isolation and confrontation, then now this is the experiment of total integration in a situation of unequal opportunities. In other words, in my mind I already split the "period of transition" into two parts. The first stage was related to the feeling of the exceptional experiences that we had accumulated during the time of totalitarianism, the experiences of the socialist culture that we tried to represent sometime from the end of the 1980-es to the middle of the 1990-es. The Eastern European art was visualizing at that time the strategies of survival in the conditions of restrictive ideology. The substance of this art could be defined as simultaneously dramatic and analytical while its identity was being interpreted as regional or historical and group-based with almost equalized internal relations.

At this time the real success story was undoubtedly the "splash" made by the so called by the West - "actual Soviet art", the Moscow Conceptualism heated up by Gorbachev's Perestroika. The up-until-recently unofficial Russian art was representing for the West the new character of the state. This success had its purely "quantitative" dimensions - a great number of new artists emerged on the international art scene, many galleries represented their works, the art press was devoting whole series of texts to their art and even private collectors of this specific art began to emerge. But the success had qualitative dimensions as well. I have in mind the definition "Europe Unknown" used by Anda Rottenberg for the title of her show (Cracow, May 1991) - maybe the most important show of the period. This term was announcing the new art from the formerly socialist countries as a part of the all-European culture. Here, the unfamiliarity of this art, a problem that seemed to be a basic problem at the time, is present as well. The solution of this problem was actually a continuation of the success story mentioned above. The new art of Eastern Europe was represented quite widely in Venice (1991, 1993), Documenta (1992) and the 3rd Istanbul Biennial (1992). I think, however, that the 22nd Sao Paulo Biennial (1994) was of crucial importance in this respect. Thanks to the already established at that time Soros Centers for Contemporary Art-Network and due largely to the personal efforts of its Executive Director, Suzanne Meszoly, the new East-European art "performed" a massive invasion of the international art scene. \*

That was also the time when Perestroika failed completely, the Soviet Union fell apart and the new Russian art ceased to personify the state. At the same time the new art of the East-European countries liberated itself from the domination of the new Russian art and within the international art world context acquired a quota of exoticism all of its own on an equal basis with

the other "exotic" cultures - the new Latin-American, Chinese, etc. art began to attract relatively equal attention.

Thus, the second stage of the integration experiment was started. Its main principle is the use of independent possibilities for success by individual artists, curators and critics from the Eastern part of Europe. The existence of a limited number of artists who are a constant presence on the international art scene is a proof for the scale of these possibilities. \*\*

For all the rest is left the possibility to fill-up the quota of the international shows within the framework of political correctness. After all, this situation could be described as normal having in mind the interest in contemporary art for the separate individual ("I am what I am because...") or for the group legitimization ("I am female, homosexual, Ecuadorian, Afro-American, etc."). On the other hand, the "decline of demand" is causing severely conflicting situations within the art world/art of the countries in Eastern Europe. The artists who have succeeded in legitimizing their own identity in the West are usually in their 40-es. Their younger colleagues who have witnessed this cultural infiltration during the process of their own professional "growing up", feel "uninvited" and "unwanted". The ambitions of the younger artists are modelled by the achievements of the previous generation while the opportunities for their realization encounter the new type of isolationism. We shouldn't forget also the practically total absence of infrastructure for contemporary art in most of our countries, the still continuing restrictiveness of the professional information, as well as, the existence of various subjective national/cultural factors such as the psychological chaos and lack of motivation. Unlike many other changes, the change in the attitude of the state towards its own contemporary art didn't happen, at least not in Bulgaria. The self-consciousness of the younger artists is the consciousness of total outsiders. As the Moscow art-critic Ekaterina Degot cleverly defines the problem - the contemporary art of Eastern Europe is 100% "agent of the West" for its own countries, an agent though that feels abandoned by his own center. That is where the insults and the humiliations, the frustration and the thirst for revenge come from.

The experiences of the Russian situation gave birth to the aggressive and terroristic actionism that has already resulted in the media stardom of Alexander Brenner and Oleg Kulik. The experiences of the much smaller Bulgarian art scene so far offer two possibilities. The first one is the return to the traditional values in art, to art that beautifies life, to the saleable artwork (in the absence of a legitimate art market). The popularity of such art within the national borders is reflected in the self-imposed and

provincial auto-isolation of culture. The other one is the absolute orientation towards the West through the copying of strategies and codes, languages and idioms of its own art. The other one is the absolute orientation towards the West through the copying of strategies and codes, languages and idioms of its own art. It is precisely the life of art that turns out to be in the center of all interests because from the marginal point of view of the young East-European artists its existence is seen as a self-sufficient system with a closed off circle of functioning - something like a new utopia. The young art in Eastern Europe is living through its art-centric period. Sometimes it seems that in spite of the declared choice of another model, the Western art model is viewed as a more developed and better one but still similar to the model that we know from the existence of the socialist system in Bulgaria. \*\*\*

The young artist himself naturally doesn't want to represent neither the socialist, nor any "post-" identity since he/she is convinced that his space, the one of art, is outside of the familiar social realities. Nonetheless, what could be said about the reality of "capitalism"? At the end of the 20th century it is impossible to glorify capitalism wholeheartedly. Besides, this would be in opposition to the strategies accepted in contemporary art. What if the problems and contradictions of capitalism are to be analysed - would the results be compatible with the works of the authors who have been brought up in capitalism's bosom? There is also, of course, the possibility to look closely into details and thus to try to make sense of the whole. However, such a fragmentary approach would require highly masterful execution and precise, aesthetically pleasing form. But - the masterful form is "by definition" outside of the capabilities and the aspirations of the young art. Thus, a serious contradiction arises between the already appropriated as "one's own" language of art and that which is signified by it. Such art is not capable to represent the unknown social reality and its manifestations. I think it represents the ambitions of its authors about what they would like to be, not about what they actually are. The young East-European artists do not feel they are citizens of their own countries - they feel they are citizens of the world of Western art, as a young colleague of mine once admitted. It could be said that in a paradoxical way the young artists exist in Baudrillard's hyperreality, not in the chaotic and traumatic reality that is surrounding us. The hyperreality is known to be generated with the help of a media mediator and exists as a projection on a screen, while its perception depends on media interpretations, as well as, on the prestige of the media itself. Thus, the already mentioned Russian artists Alexander Brenner and Oleg Kulik became idols for the entire generation because of their media success, again to quote a young

colleague. The so-called Sofia radical artists think of themselves as a projection of the Brenner/Kulik activities. \*\*\*\*

Is the existing post-experimental/neo-experimental reality in a position to satisfy a question about "neo - how, where and for whom?". In view of the above described circumstances - there will be no easy answers. Today each artistic gesture falls into a strictly defined co-ordinate system that immediately labels its affiliation with one discourse or another. This becomes a problem only when the artist himself gets to be his own interpreter and refuses to accept any other interpretations. The East-European art today refuses to admit its own East-European identity because this, in its view, would be a speculation with the repulsive everyday reality. Because this still is the identity of the loser, of the one that has been outrun and left behind, of the provincial one. I am not talking here about the loss of identity but about the choice to reject any known identity in the hope that it would be possible "to hide" in another one. However, this turns out to be an evidence of provinciality, even of self-inflicted provincialism because there is neither concrete life material to represent, nor is there any possibility to offer a new form/packaging for the world art market. But how is this related to the widespread notion that there is no longer neither a center, nor a periphery, the proclaimed globalization? This is probably true as far as the creation of forms and meanings is concerned. The problem however is not the creation of universally relevant forms and meanings but the creation of a strong context capable not only to accommodate and assimilate outside influences but also to radiate reciprocal energies.

Obviously, these would have to be based on a self-sufficient infrastructure the necessity of which is becoming slowly recognized. At first it could be just a symbolic informational and educational infrastructure - the only possibility under the present economic conditions. Something like Niels Bohr's "Groups for solving all problems" that structure the context and prepare the ground for the real discoveries. The other way out is being formulated through the use of the virtual technologies that acknowledge no boundaries and distances. Potentially they could erase all social and economical inequalities and that's why they are particularly attractive for us. Born out of the need to communicate, the virtual space is becoming the ideal channel for sending information back and forth. In its turn the digital art as the newest kind of art is not yet appropriated (excluding the technology for its production) neither by the center nor by the periphery. It looks now to be relatively democratic and thus giving a chance to the next generations from both East and West to use a common language. \*\*\*\*\*

Obviously the practical solution of problem is removed in the undetermined future. But the theoretical reflection upon the relation "local - universal" is currently possible more than ever. If, for instance, in the beginning of the 1980-is the problem for the periphery was how to invade the center, now, in the 1990-is when, presumably, there is no more a center, the question is what, after all, are the specific national characteristics of a quite universal art discourse. The "look inside", here and now, is being triggered by the eagerly accepted cosmopolitan nature of the whole cultural situation. The urgent question within the debate about Bulgarian or Eastern-European contemporary art now is: "How art "Made in Bulgaria" is related to art "Made in the World"? Or, to use some "foreign" terminology instead of a metaphor - we would like to find out just how nationally productive is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), just how Bulgarian is the World bank, etc.?

In order to find out art, obviously, should not bypass (once again - ironically) the problems of its own society. It has to make an educated choice and bare its responsibilities. In other words, our art will be just as much Bulgarian and East-European as we would be able to make it. And World Art as well. And Good Art as well. On the other hand the art of the young is changing rapidly by definition. There will be another generation with its own art and new ideals, interests, etc. And in that context today's art will also look in a different way.

Slides:

\* Nedko Solakov's "Bulgarian-American Souvenirs" and "The Collector of Art", as well as, Luchezar Boyadjiev's "The Fountain of Europe" and "Neo-Golgotha", all - 1994.

\*\* Pravdoliub Ivanov's "Territoty" (1995), Kossio Minchev's "Icon" (1994)

\*\*\* Kalin Serapionov's "Do You Feel You are Different?" (1996), Nedko Solakov's "Doodles" (1996)

\*\*\*\* Kiril Prashkov's "Sky" (1996-7), Pravdoliub Ivanov's "Easy Banners" (1997), Nedko Solakov's "Somewhere (under the tree)" (1997), Luchezar Boyadjiev's "Digital Plovdiv" (1997)

\*\*\*\* Kalin Serapionov's "Project 'Kunst in...'" (1997), Pravdoliub Ivanov's "Safety Garden" (1997), Kiril Prashkov's "Speaking Cobblestones" (1997)

\*\*\*\*\* Kalin Serapionov's "The Door" (1997), Kalin Serapionov's "Going There - Coming Back" (1997)