

Iara Boubnova

**Sofia, Palm Trees Are Your Chestnut
Trees...**

[Translation from Bulgarian - Luchezar Boyadjiev]

[1.999 words, 1994]

Bulgaria



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.

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.

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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Sofia, Palm Trees Are Your Chestnut Trees...

When Bulgaria believed that it is among the most progressive and flourishing societies in the world there was just the above verse in a children's poem from the 1970-ies about the happy life of its young citizens. And this carefully nourished illusion was meant not only for the kids – under the shadows of the Sofia “palm trees”, heavily laden with fruit, the so called “creative” people from the art world felt great as well.

Naturally, the regime had brought together in the so-called Creative Unions the entire art and culture related intelligentsia. It had also subjected it to the same “pressing” which is all-too-well-known from all the former Socialist countries. But at the same time, the regime had fairly quickly rid itself from some of its most repressive functions in order not to appear to be too much black in color. It had delegated these functions to the same Unions. The regime simply turned the state into the sole buyer of art works and left it to the artists to divide the commissions between themselves. As a result, the main characteristic of Bulgarian cultural life at that time was that everyone felt happy about it – the state, which recognized that the self-created hierarchy among the artists is more flexible than the one it had given them itself and that no creative liberty will turn into “art”; the artists – who were being “fed” often enough and were freed from the fortuity of the market; the public – which never suspected exactly how much it was paying for the same propagated culture it passing by quietly. Thus, the myth about the pleasure of being an artist was something like a reward of fate. This myth impressed quite successfully both the West and the East. And this

prosperity “freed” Bulgarian socialist art from the alternative trends – all attempts at this were duly tamed. The heavy load of the art formula coined by “the first Eastern European culturologist” comrade Stalin that art in Socialism is “socialist in form and popular in content” was transformed into art which is “socialist” as formal affiliation and “popular” as part of the highest honorary title “Popular Artist”.

The image of sunny Bulgaria, the lack of underwater rocks in its culture, enabled the country to play a certain role - that of “cultural customs” for the Big Brother, the Soviet Union. Every “risky” achievement of the Soviet artists, actors and writers used to first receive in Bulgaria the “seal of approval” for its possible way to the West. Everywhere the customs office profits from things getting through. And, so Bulgarian culture benefited. from this situation by becoming a part of a cultural process which had been of far greater magnitude than it could possibly generate by itself.

Today, by definition, Bulgaria is in a state of transition. There is no money for culture, no new laws (the so much longed for “Europe like” laws), no market structures. There is no longer the illusory equality of international relations. There isn't, there isn't...

Already in the 1940-ies – the great communist leader George Dimitrov stated that our country should accomplish for a couple of decades that which other countries have needed many centuries in order to accomplish. His words turned out to be full of truth even after the fall down of Communism. Time in Bulgaria, especially cultural time, as if moves faster than the astronomical time. Art, facing complete freedom without any previous training (the already mentioned lack of underground) started to look for salvation on many different levels all at the same time.

First appeared the private commercial art galleries - their number obviously exceeding the resources of the context. Quite a few artists “woke up” one morning as gallery owners – some because they believed only they knew what is Bulgarian art, others – because they couldn't show their own works anywhere else, still others – because they had heard that running a gallery is a rich men's business. But the new illusions were destroyed quickly. It turned out that the worst gallerists are the egocentric and spoiled artists. In just about three years the number of the art galleries in Sofia alone fell from 50 to less than 20.

Another, quite resourceful reaction, was the idea of Georgi Todorov, a historian of literature, where the new freedom is paired-up with the lack-of-

underground complex. Precisely because of the lack local avant-garde to try to transplant on Bulgarian art-soil its most important examples and thus to leaf through the history of the foreign avant-garde as if through a concise avant-garde reader - performance, land-art, sots-art, conceptual art, etc. For better and for worse as well, this large-scale project failed - the artists' ego was not up to an educational sacrifice. But the first steps of this experiment helped to a lot of artists to start in this direction. The closed door opened, and they had to overcome their shyness.

Quite soon it became obvious that the Bulgarian artist, having been brought-up in a state of collective responsibility, is not yet capable of facing-up to his/her own problems all by him/herself. The Bulgarian artist rushed-on to create groups, societies, associations, etc., to try once again to institutionalize him/herself. Artists' groups flourished establishing themselves on the basis of generation, ideology, way of life, vague intuitions for "otherness", professional specialization, etc. The most famous one of them all turned out to be the Club of the (eternally) Young Artist. The most famous as a fighter against the professional taboo, the routine and the old habits. Given the all-over polarization of Bulgarian society lately the opposition between "us" and "them" was valid for quite a long time. In the common inertia against the old times the artists took part in the fight "against": state monopoly, all levels of administration, other artists. And everybody used the refusal of the past as an initial springboard for acceleration.

But a way into the future is very difficult to find. Naturally some misunderstandings appeared in the collision with the market. The inevitable commercialization of art was thought of as of an obvious degeneration of art. The artist gets used to the realistic monetary evaluation of his/hers art, to the payment for intermediary services, to the worrying for a concrete audience by going through a lot of pains and sorrows...

The conventional artists are deeply offended by the appearance of authors without the previously mandatory professional artistic training and academic education. They are offended by the newly formed situation where anybody has the right to show his/hers art works practically any place he/she might choose. The professional artists' community is deeply upset by the loss of control over the internal and, more importantly, over the external (international) art contacts as well. This is largely due to the far greater and freer influx of professional information, as well as (but to a lesser degree), to purely administrative reasons. Thus, the uncontrollable influx of information revealed all of a sudden that the Autumn Salon in

Paris is no longer the most prestigious exhibition in Europe and that this has been the case for something like 100 years. It also revealed the fact that participating in major international art events does not necessarily require being a part of an official delegation.

These disappointments appeared synchronously with the "thinning" of the professional artists' layer. On the surface the reason would appear to be that a lot of young artists emigrated "to the West" - as all countries outside of the former Socialist camp are called in Bulgaria for reasons of shortness (including Canada, Australia, South Africa who turned out to be the most hospitable ones for the Bulgarian emigrants). Of course, this process was based on the illusion that the artist is indeed being appreciated "there".

But even more unpleasant was the revelation that far from every author belongs to the layer of the free, God-chosen artists. The situation of "primary accumulation of market structures" through out of the ranks of creative artists the designers, the book-illustrators, the ceramics artists and all the rest who need contracts, production facilities, etc. The pride of being an artist suffered a lot from the differentiated attitudes of society towards his/hers activity. On the other hand, the more pragmatically oriented artistic activities adjusted earlier and easier to the new economic situation and quietly became a part of it.

While losing his/hers secured and exclusive status in society, the Bulgarian artist turned his genuine professional interest towards the art critic for the first time in a long while. Up until recently the art criticism existed almost by the force of habit. The analysis, the appreciation and the interpretation of the cultural facts were left in the hands of the artists themselves. The derogatory attitude towards the art critic who until now fulfilled minor tasks of informative and educational nature, is now being substituted by the acknowledgement of art's dependency on it. Actually, this was felt by the private galleries - they were the first to become highly competitive. Given the fact that the interest towards contemporary Bulgarian art as a market commodity is barely beginning to grow now, the problem of being well-known and popular comes to the foreground. The gallery owners started to approach the art critic, to try to influence him/her and even to make timid attempts at corrupting him. The artists, on the contrary, had hoped for a long time that the art critic has a "duty", a "responsibility", "must be objective". They still believe that an art critics' attention must be distributed equally among everyone.

But even harder goes the process of adjustment to the emerging activity of the curator. The most typical characteristics of the curators' activity - its subjectivity and authoritativeness are being accused of antidemocratic leanings which is considered to be a political and pejorative qualification right now. The most difficult thing to accept for the ones brought up in the spirit of mandatory equality is the new selectivity of the situation. The curated shows are being viewed with a lot of suspicion as something not entirely natural when there is a freak with totalitarianism. On the other hand there is a competition already going on between the curators of art which becomes even more fierce in the absence of big and independent exhibition spaces. As a result, Bulgaria lives through a period of open-air art festivals taking place all over the country.

The youngest generation of artists enters vehemently into the artistic life. Its most notorious characteristic is the total disregard for authority. The real personal history of these young authors dates back from about five years. So, they joyfully declare their non-commitment even to the most recently established art "traditions". They have come to being in an open world and they feel cosmopolitan enough not to be impressed by the conscious or the unconscious mistakes of their "predecessors". The young generation is cheerfully optimistic in spite of the overwhelming problems of the country and is open to all kinds of information. It takes the new for granted and doesn't need time for adjustment. As a whole, having a higher level of erudition, the new artists in their creative interests cross over the national boundaries with a lot of ease.

The artistic climate as a whole is still endlessly variable and unpredictable. But that which looked like a problem yesterday, turns out to be reality today. Gradually the homogeneity is being destroyed. There clearly appear several layers in it now - on one hand Bulgarian art is becoming more commercialized, on the other - it is getting more conceptualized. In the middle, between these polarities so natural in normal circumstances, there exists a dense layer of artists who actually endure the whole confusion of the transition. The artist is being gradually estranged from the last illusion - that he/she is a member of a caste. He/she recognizes more and more him/herself as an individual and the activity he/she is involved in as an existential act.